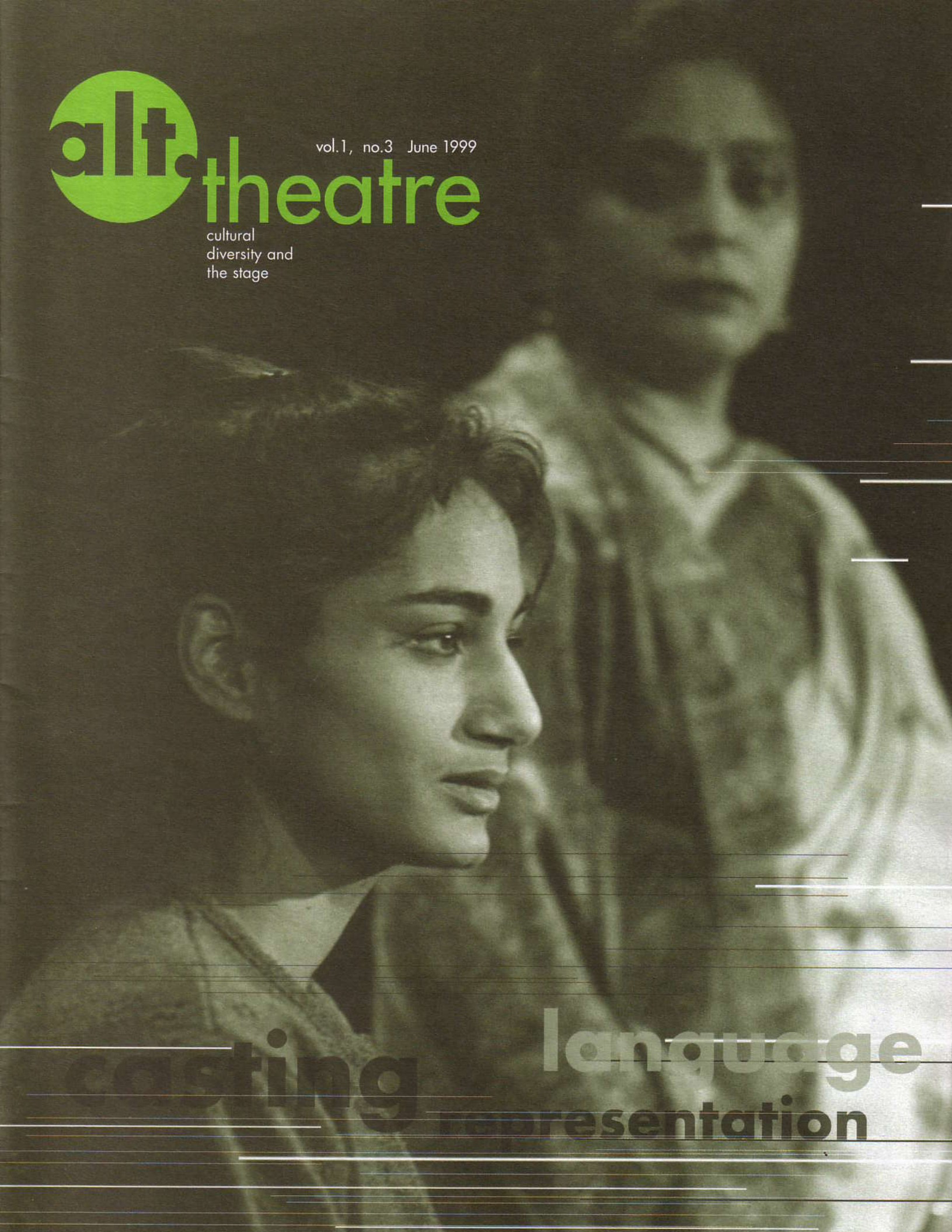
alt.theatre
vol.1, no.3 June 1999
cultural diversity and the stage



casting language representation

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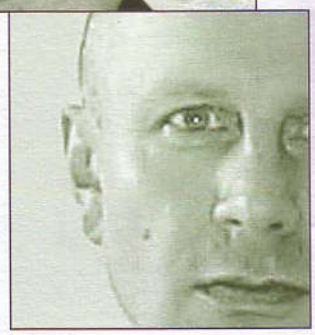
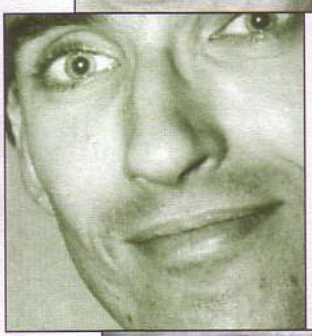
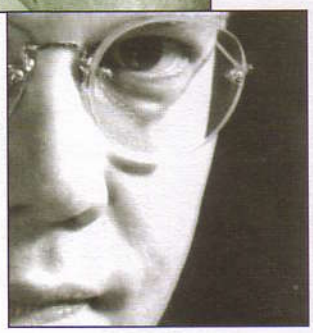


Cover: Micheline Dahlander (left) and Ranjana Jha in a scene from *L'Affaire Farhadi*.
Photo by Maxime Coté.





alt.theatre

Editor: Russell Krackovitch
Contributors: Paul Lefebvre, Edward Little, Ken McDonough, Jane Needles, Rahul Varma, Svetlana Zylin.
Artistic Director: Tracy Martin
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TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE
4324 St. Laurent Blvd.
Montreal, QC H2W 1Z3
Canada

Tel: (514) 848-0238
Fax: (514) 848-0267
Email: tduniya@aei.ca
Website: www.aei.ca/~tduniya

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THEATRE

Photo by Jon Ghoddoussi

Editorial: Acceptance vs. celebration

Watch what you ask for, because you just may get it

In almost every campaign for change by a given group, there is confusion surrounding the vocabulary of the central issues being debated. As the recently appointed editor of **alt.theatre**, I feel it is my duty to minimize that confusion as much as possible in regards to the fight for recognition of ethnic artists across Canada.

We as a community of concerned individuals can work most effectively towards equality in the Canadian arts scene once we are united by a common understanding of the goals at hand.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this struggle is to ensure that we are all fighting for the same thing. Some call for the acceptance of ethnic artists as a legitimate part of the Canadian arts scene. Others, like myself, go a step further to demand that artists and art from culturally diverse communities be praised as something unique and special. Indeed, there is an important distinction to be made between the mere acceptance of something and the celebration of that thing.

To accept something is to tolerate it and allow it to exist without debate. Out of resignation or, even worse, lack of interest, one accepts things because they are not important enough to dispute. Achieving acceptance means earning a place among any number of unspecified things. Acceptance, by this definition, is hardly something for which to fight.

To celebrate something, on the other hand, is to recognize it as exceptional and distinct. Calling for the celebration of cultural diversity in Canadian theatre—as **alt.theatre** does—is demanding that special attention be paid to the work of ethnic artists not simply because they are ethnic, but because they offer a wealth of talent with new ideas and points of view.

Achieving acceptance is, at best, an important but preliminary step in perpetuating equality. We must, however, be careful not to stagnate in that acceptance.

The brilliant works of our culturally diverse artists deserve more than mere acceptance by Canada's artistic community. Those artists and their works should be hailed as invaluable parts of our country's rich cultural tapestry. We should not merely call for the acceptance of such a treasure, but embrace it as extraordinary and worthy of our utmost celebration.

That celebration could take several forms. From events showcasing the works of ethnic artists to extra funding being made available, any initiative that engages in the proactive promotion of cultural diversity is better than the idle acceptance of some unavoidable reality.

I am honoured to be part of this celebration, in my capacity as editor of this magazine, and look forward to highlighting and supporting the cultural diversity that makes the whole of Canadian society as interesting and unique as it is.

Russell Krackovitch

Multiculturalism—A window on life

By Jane Needles, Arts Administrator and Consultant

Photo by Ron Diamond

Jane Needles

Unconventional casting sheds new light on familiar roles

Crossed or mixed, colour-blind or multi-ethnic casting and productions are opportunities to explore new avenues and challenges in our daily lives. Sadly, these practices are far too rare in the cultural communities across Canada.

Many different cultural associations and organizations—including the Canadian Actors' Equity Association, the Canada Council, and ACTRA—ask repeatedly why such activities are so uncommon. They endeavour collectively to turn this situation around and encourage producers and presenters to find ways to embrace the cultural diversity this country manifests.

But why is there such resistance to change? In any given community, representation from almost every country in the world, either through heritage or immigration, can be found. Each member of that community brings something special to bear on every element of their community.

Some people recognize this and some do not. Perhaps it is the same in the theatre world, where we possess a wealth of talent that is vastly underused and under-appreciated. How unfortunate it is that we cut ourselves off from such extraordinary opportunities to learn and expand our horizons.

We can learn so much from each other, especially through the medium of a performance or a film, where revelations about the traditions and practices of another culture or heritage abound.

Why again, then, is it so difficult to find a company or presenter that will take the supposed risk of producing a culturally relevant production that highlights the elements of a cultural society which are different from the known product?

Is it that the audiences are afraid to be provoked into a new way of reflection on life in general? Or perhaps it's the same old shortsighted adage that always seems to be dragged out—"we've never done it that way before" transposed into "we've never seen it that way before."

Some shining examples

To be fair, there are examples of companies that do recognize the value of cross-casting and multi-ethnic productions. Fortunately for us all, these companies have broken down the invisible barriers that have been erected in the name of tradition.

Geordi Productions, Teesri Duniya Theatre and Repercussion Theatre are perhaps the three most prominent companies in this regard.

Imagine a *Romeo and Juliet* in which Lord Capulet is played by a black man, the audience so enthralled in the performances that they barely even notice. Envision Puck being played by an East Indian, adding to the magical aura that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* already presents.

Consider a frighteningly accurate depiction of the treatment of a young woman by a man, blinded by passion and oblivious to the laws of this land—a play that captures the plight of many immigrants who face fundamental adjustments in order to live in new societies with new regulations and ideologies. The same play emphasizes the well-known problem of exploitation, which happens on both sides of the cultural divide.

These are but a few examples of what these companies provide while demonstrating the capabilities of performers regardless of their ethnic backgrounds or heritages. The possibilities are endless.

Imagine, for example, a production of *The Importance of Being Ernest* with Lady Bracknell being played by a man (already done in Stratford, Ontario with William Hutt playing the indomitable character) and Algernon being played by a black person—which could make even more hilarious the line "In a handbag!"

Such a production would break down the barriers of the era so deeply ingrained in the play. In fact, it might even present a more vivid depiction of the absolute mockery the upper class were capable of making of themselves, where every cucumber sandwich and every tea cup counted for far more than real-life possibilities.

An exercise in creative casting

An exercise presented to the Canadian Actors' Equity Association by Brenda Kamino, chair of the Equitable Participation Task Force, challenged the Association to propose diverse cross-cultural and cross-gender casting for several plays. The extremely interesting results that the Association members came up with were presented to producers to demonstrate that such ideas were feasible.

Unfortunately, few of these producers have risen to the challenge. The Task Force has also published, in the Equity Newsletter, its Mandate for Inclusion.

Hopefully, the necessity for such initiatives shows that they are tantamount to the healthy survival of our cultural communities across the country and throughout the world. Cross-casting, and productions validating cultural differences, are not privileges, but signs of respect and encouragement.

They are tools of wisdom, tools of insight and tools of discernment, and windows on the world of innovation and adventure. They should be used, and used well, to their fullest magnitude. ●

Imagine a *Romeo and Juliet* in which Lord Capulet is played by a black man, the audience so enthralled in the performances that they barely even notice.

We can learn so much from each other, especially through the medium of a performance or a film, where revelations about the traditions and practices of another culture or heritage abound.

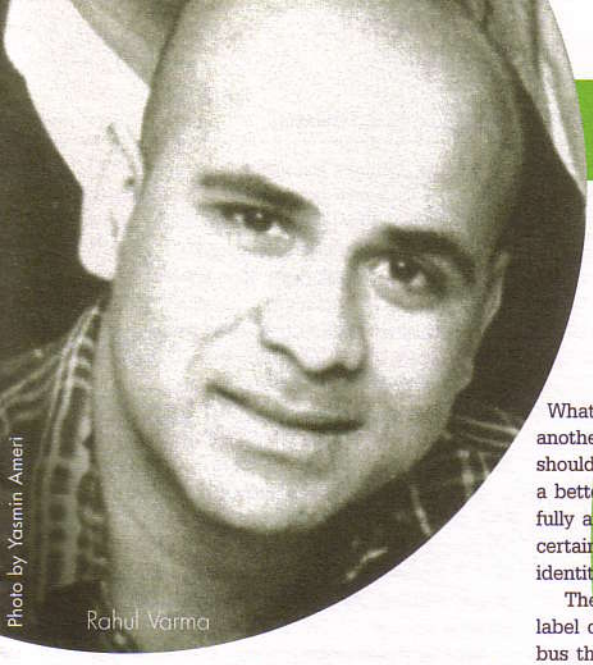

Photo by Yasmin Ameri

Rahul Varma

United we stand

By Rahul Varma

Ethnic artists and their communities face joint struggle for recognition

In the mid 1980s, about twenty dark and hungry men, women and children—claiming to be refugees from Sri Lanka—landed on the shore of Newfoundland in an open boat. The major national television networks broadcast their arrival.

The most striking image in my mind was not that of the tired, hungry and homeless Sri Lankans who had risked shark-infested waters to come here, but that of some onlookers flashing a placard before the television cameras which read "Trash Go Back."

Government investigators later discovered that the refugee claim was false. When cross-questioned, the alleged refugees admitted they had sold all their belongings to pay an agent to smuggle them into the country. Following intervention by churches, community groups and many generous Canadians, the authorities allowed the Sri Lankans to stay in Canada.

Statistics show that those who jump ship or cross the border illegally are only rarely allowed to stay in Canada, but that doesn't prevent others from trying. However, whether they enter legally or not, new Canadians from poor or non-white countries share a common experience; they acquire not only a new country but also new labels like "queue jumper," "gold digger," "burden on the system" and "job stealer." It is therefore natural to raise certain questions.

Some important questions

For example, did these newcomers know in advance that they would be told "trash go back" and labelled job stealers? If so, were they willing to accept this as the price of coming here?

Also, as a new Canadian (via the legal route), I often ask myself how recent arrivals to the country differ from those people who claim to have discovered Canada. How justified are we all in claiming rights to this land that originally belonged to the native people?

What makes one person a job stealer and another a job seeker? What social price should immigrants expect to pay in return for a better life? These questions may never be fully answered, but engaging in this debate certainly helps us understand the issues of identity, culture and values in Canada.

The question concerning the job stealer label came to me at about 4:30 a.m. aboard a bus that snaked through Montreal's industrial zones. Most of the passengers—immigrant workers of Italian, Greek, Portuguese, African and Asian origin that had worked night shifts and were returning home—were asleep in their seats. By some miraculous sixth sense, they would wake up at their stops and get off the bus.

Were these the so-called job stealers? Were some of them former queue jumpers, now milling around in Canada?

A Gujrati worker on the bus, introducing himself as Kishore, moved over to make room for me. Kishore told me he had little time to play with his 15-month-old because he worked the night shift. He said his shifts were long and he had no choice but to sleep when he got home.

> The implementation of various rules and regulations aimed at racial equality in the arts has made significant strides, but there is still a long way to go.

The Canadian experience

Kishore told me he had not been able to get a day job in his field because he lacked Canadian experience; a situation that had not changed. He said the only jobs available to him in his field were the ones no native-born Canadian would accept. I knew this was typical of the labour-intensive workforce in Canada.

"And they still call us job stealers," I said, the words falling from my mouth.

"I am not a fool," Kishore replied with a mirthful laugh. "If I had to steal, I would steal something better." It is to Kishore that the play *Job Stealer*, co-written by Helen Vlachos, Ian Lloyd-George and myself, owes its punch line.

Needless to say, the work-related experience Kishore referred to is a valuable asset, but the term "Canadian experience," particularly in cases like Kishore's, doesn't necessarily mean work-related experience.

Interestingly enough, while most Canadian institutions, and even large corporations, are busy reorganizing themselves to accommodate cultural plurality and implementing employment equity, the term "Canadian experience" remains a device used to legitimize exploitation. Vlachos, a Canadian of Greek descent, pointed out to me that a beer-bash or other victory celebration for a university sports team is a valid Canadian experience, while years of work in a Third-World country merit only unregulated employment at sweatshops or low-paying factory jobs.

These sentiments found resonance in the agit-prop play *Equal Wages*, which Vlachos and I wrote. Following is a brief excerpt:

Mohan: I apply to all jobs from the career pages of the newspaper...some would call for an interview.

Shyamala: And in the interview he will ask you, "do you have Canadian experience?"

Mohan: I tell them "no."

Shyamala: Then he will tell you, "no Canadian experience, no job."

Mohan: That is right, but how did you know?

Shyamala: That is my Canadian experience.

Kishore, Mohan, Shyamala and their coworkers in the sweatshops and factories are not the only ones facing the barrier of Canadian experience. Many artists from ethnic communities share the same fate. Until very recently, Canada's arts-funding bodies did not officially recognize their artistic experiences in their countries of origin.

Fortunately, central institutions have, in recent years, begun to recognize cultural and artistic plurality as a component of artistic practice rather than merely as an unmet principle. The implementation of various rules and regulations aimed at racial equality in the arts has made significant strides, but there is still a long way to go.

Competitive hurdles are unlike racial barriers

There is a commonality between the experiences of the immigrant work force and those of immigrant artists when dealing with the so-called Canadian experience. Yet I find many mainstream artists equate the competitive hurdles of their fields with the racial and systemic barriers experienced by artists from diverse communities.

In a recent discussion, certain well-established but under-funded artists from the

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Relative tongues

Language, identity and cultural place

By Svetlana Zylin (a.k.a. Lucie LaRusse)

Svetlana Zylin

If Russian is my mother tongue, is French my father tongue? And what about English, the language of my primary education? A brother, a sister? A distant cousin? What language do I feel most comfortable with? What language do I dream in? What language do I work in? Is it all relative? And if so, to what?

I came to this country in 1954 as the child of Russian parents who had been displaced by the Second World War. After a seven-year stint in Belgium, where I was born, my family was accepted by Canada for immigration.

The first word I learned in English was "sharrup". It was some time before I discovered it was actually two words: shut up. All I knew was that when someone yelled "DP" at me, I screamed back "sharrup". I doubt the neighbourhood children knew the taunt was an acronym for displaced person, any more than I fully understood my retort. One word or two, it didn't spare me the daily beatings on my way to and from school. Russian accents were particularly unpopular then; McCarthyism had infiltrated Canada and Communists were seen as devils.

Naturally, all Russians were Communists, and that meant even seven-year-old blonde ones were evil incarnate. I turned my back on Russian and determined to vanquish the English language, believing that, if I could learn English well enough, I would achieve acceptance.

A language for each occasion

Before I came to Canada, Russian was my primary language. Russian words were my family. They could get me food, a warmer blanket, or sympathy when I was feeling sick. The Russian language dominated in my home and provided me with love and security. When I spoke it, I felt warm and safe.

French became my second language. French words were my allies, an opening to the outside world. They got me information and friends, and offered a way to satisfy my curiosity. It was the language of my early schooling, and provided me with acceptance and knowledge. When I spoke it, I felt smart and strong.

English was my third language. English words were adversaries, hurdles to jump, vital tools to acquire if I was to succeed. English gave me fortitude and will, an overwhelming desire to overcome scorn and achieve acceptance. When I spoke it, I felt stubborn and proud.

Determined as I was to learn the language, I didn't take well to English. It constantly confounded me with its inconsistencies. With educational emphasis on reading aloud in those days, my confusion would usually result in public ridicule.

> Openness to difference can only enrich the theatrical terrain. In the world of images, words need not be an impediment.

After English classes, I would sneak off, often in tears, to visit the one French-speaking teacher in the school. I was relieved to be able to articulate questions and get answers that made sense.

Speaking French gave me courage. It was like my father; a tongue encouraging independence and intellectual thought, a masculine approach to mastering the language of my enemies.

My relationship with my mother tongue had become sullen and monosyllabic. Speaking Russian was not going to get me what I craved most: acceptance by my classmates and neighbours. The soft, emotional cadences of the Russian language could not protect me from harassment. Speaking French with Mrs. Duvernay was a necessary sanctuary, an oasis of comfort.

That comfort was soon taken away from me. My homeroom teacher discovered and reported my activity to the principal, arguing that I was not only indulging in unauthorized activity, but also jeopardizing my ability to learn English. Mrs. Duvernay was forbidden to talk to me in French. On school grounds, I was to speak only English. My determination deepened. I'd show them.

It was easier said than done, but within three years I was reading out loud in front of my class. I had become a model student, reading voraciously and winning library awards. By grade seven, I had joined the honour roll.

It was a long time before I learned to love the English language. I was so busy learning it, I had no time to like it. It wasn't until I discovered theatre that the potential power and beauty of English manifested itself in my life.

When in grade eight, I was asked to play a part in the class production of *The Bishop's Candlesticks*. I found the entire experience not only liberating but also rewarding. Freed from the constraints of speaking correctly, I was acting a part, being a character, and that, for the first time in my Canadian life, garnered me applause and praise. I joined the school drama club, became a student at the Manitoba Theatre Centre theatre school, and embarked on a new kind of life.

Coincidentally, I also began to dream in English. An identity was beginning to assert itself. I was able to integrate my lost Russian dreams into my newfound world of theatre, where Russian culture had a place. Chekhov was revered, and I became an authority since I knew the plays in their original Russian.

French stayed on the back burner, sufficiently alive to allow me to avoid doing French homework all through high school. That gave me more time for the drama club.

Learning English allowed a small measure of acceptance, but it was in theatre that I felt I could truly be myself, and where I experienced a real sense of belonging. English as a tool gave me the freedom to maneuver through the wonderful maze of theatre. Wherever I could, I tried to bypass the language in order to forge theatrical pictures.

Into those pictures, I could place my Russian heritage, my Belgian birthplace, my burgeoning English sensibility, my immigrant musings, and my Canadian doubts. And in that forge, I found my cultural place.

Where do language and culture converge?

When I moved to Montreal over a decade ago, it was to take the job of running Playwrights' Workshop Montreal. After spending years in the trenches of Canadian play development, becoming artistic director of one of Canada's premier play development centres was a personal ambition realized.

To enjoy Quebec's bicultural and bilingual existence on a daily basis was also very attractive. Because the primary mandate of

PWM was to develop English playwrights, there was limited room for French or Russian within the confines of my job there.

I resurrected a dormant translation program and initiated a relationship with the Centre des auteurs dramatiques to translate plays between French and English. A grant from the Department of External Affairs brought in a Russian playwright for a six-week residency, but the bulk of my work was about honing the English language through dramatic text, championing the cause of Montreal anglophone writers. Ironically, I had to move to a French city to feel truly at home with the English language.

I am no longer artistic director at PWM, but I stay in Montreal, where my life has become an interesting hybrid of three languages and three cultures. I attend French theatre, have wonderful parties in Russian, and spend time on my computer in English. To further the irony of my move to Quebec, I have become an English language playwright.

With my mother living here, and occasional opportunities as a translator, Russian is again present in my life. French has surprisingly not reasserted itself into my life in a familial way. It's like a good neighbour, or a not-so-intimate friend I love to have dinner with occasionally. It remains the language of the street and of occasional business, but it doesn't yet have a hold on me. In the meantime, I'm learning Spanish. Go figure.

Beyond language

What makes a work cross-cultural or multicultural? All culture is, after all, inherently multicultural. If culture is defined as the quality in a person or society that arises from interest in arts, letters, scholarly pursuits, etc., I can't believe there is that much separating us all.

Language, in and of itself, is not the barrier. Particularly in the world of theatre, where a common dramatic lexicon can transcend language, there is infinite space to house our multicultural interests.

When I came to Canada, it was my inability to communicate in the dominant language that caused me grief. I suffered language shock, not culture shock. The French word is "culture," the Russian word is "cultura," and each is defined the same way.

Most of us are drawn to the arts and to theatre. Everyone reading this magazine is concerned with making the arts, particularly theatre, more inclusive. Openness to difference can only enrich the theatrical terrain. In the world of images, words need not be an impediment.

Montreal has seen many imported works performed in foreign languages, and the emotions communicated by the actors have most often been absolutely clear. We've also seen productions incorporating other cultural influences to great effect—such as Ariana Mnouchkine's re-interpretation of the Greek myths utilizing Kathakali dance. Teesri Duniya has given new theatrical resonance to agit-prop with Rahul Varma's play, *Counter Offence*, which has been produced in both official languages with equal acclaim.

The global village is not homogeneous, and is consequently much more interesting. I've left certain Canadian cities because I found them, in my parlance, "too white-bread."

My play, *The Destruction of Eve*, is set in heaven when God summons a few people, including the Virgin Mary, for a meeting. It was very important to me that my visions of heaven embrace all our differences. I was able to team up with Company of Sirens and, when the play was produced last year in Toronto, I had the full support of that company's feminist mandate, which also demanded a multi-racial, multi-ethnic cast.

As a director, I have encountered producers who insisted I hire the "better" actor, often meaning better known, better trained, or better looking. In other words, a better representation of what this country's dominant theatrical culture considers the norm. The tendency of these actors to be white, middle class, and mostly male has often obscured the all-important issue of access for certain groups—including access to training, networking opportunities, our main stages and our publications.

> It wasn't until I discovered theatre that the potential power and beauty of English manifested itself in my life.

Hiring a well-known white woman would have been expedient when we had difficulty casting a part for *The Destruction of Eve*, but we had to respect the company's mandate. Does "better representation of our multicultural society" need to be written into all theatre mandates before we can celebrate all our minorities—racial, ethnic and linguistic—on stage? Why not? Perhaps this time that misguided slogan used to headline the Year of the Woman will work to better effect.

'If there were dreams to sell,
Merry and sad to tell,
And the crier rung his bell,
What would you buy?' ●

Svetlana Zylin is a director, dramaturge and playwright based in Montreal with a special interest in developing new works for the Canadian stage. She is presently on a Canada Council grant writing a new play, tentatively titled *Garbage*, which is a family drama dealing with personal identity as it relates to ethnicity. Her last play, a musical revisionist take on the Genesis myth called *The Destruction of Eve*, was produced in Toronto by Company of Sirens in association with Hit and Run. Svetlana is artistic producer at Hit and Run, a Montreal company dedicated to innovative theatre with a feminist outlook.

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dominant culture argued that there has been no decline in the hardship they encounter trying to access funds and other support offered by the arts-funding bodies. I see this as an indirect way of assigning the job stealer label without actually using the term.

It is erroneous and shortsighted to correlate systemic racial barriers with competitive hurdles. General competition is common to all artists. Racial hurdles, on the other hand, are additional and unnecessary, and should be regarded as undemocratic in Canada.

Furthermore, equating competitive hurdles with racial obstacles undermines the work of Canadians who are trying to build a non-discriminatory system that will not only ensure the same value for every dollar, but will also grant everyone the same opportunity to earn that dollar.

The conditions for artists—dominant and minority alike—depend on the extent to which we attempt to implement structural changes that are reflective and representative of Canada's constituting communities. These changes must be made on the basis of equality, and simultaneously respect cultural difference.

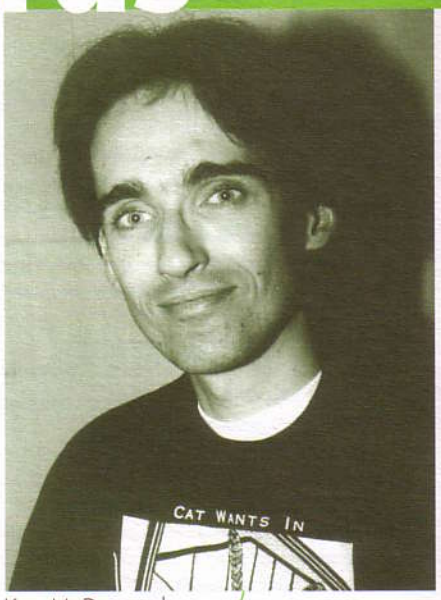
In addition, the conditions for ethnic artists will not change as long as there is no improvement of conditions for the rest of the ethnic workforce. The needs of ethnic artists to translate their labour into rewards and recognition reflect the needs of the communities from which they draw their creative inspiration. The two—community and artist—are consequently bound together in a common struggle. ●

Rahul Varma is artistic director of Teesri Duniya Theatre.

In their own words

Characters must speak their own languages for most effective expression

By Ken McDonough



Ken McDonough

I have watched Teesri Duniya grow for close to nine years. As a translator, I am accustomed to making the switch between English and French. As a Montrealer, I know that the city's ethnic communities are also delineated, even internally, along the French-English dichotomy, adopting French or English as their second language or speaking it as their mother tongue.

I have therefore always believed that Teesri Duniya would never truly reflect the full diversity or reality of the larger community around it until it managed to straddle the main language divide. Leaping the language barrier, I knew, would also require breaching a cultural wall to contribute to, and receive from, the other side.

The obstacles within Teesri Duniya have at times seemed insurmountable. Yet the group, while respecting its original roots, has already made the shift from being a Hindi-language company to being an English-language one. As it strove to draw on the artistic possibilities of Canada's diversified culture, the company attracted many players and participants from other communities and walks of life and, under the leadership of its artistic director, built professional links with the active Anglophone theatre community.

The language issue presented itself during interviews with francophone funding decision-makers, forcing the company to confront the fact that, despite its aspirations and the distance it had covered, it still could not engage in a debate with the larger community or say it was fully representative of that community. After all, at least 80 per cent of the community functioned in French outside the home, and most lived and thought in the language.

The issues were topical and relevant. It was imperative for Teesri Duniya, as a socially driven organization, to get through this next growth spurt so it could better reflect the city.

A doorway to multilingualism

Counter Offence offered the group the door it was looking for and, as it had done many times in its brief history, Teesri Duniya took the opportunity and walked through. The success of the English play attracted La Licorne, a local French theatre space. Discussions were held for the use of the space, and a grant was obtained to ensure the play's translation. Months later, *L' Affaire Farhadi* was born.

In the time between the twinkle in the creator's eye and the birth of the French play, positive experiences quickly laid any concerns to rest. The translator, Pierre Legris, took a hands-on approach to the project, engaging the playwright in the translation process. Paul Lefebvre, meanwhile, acted as a bridge between the group and the professional Francophone theatre community.

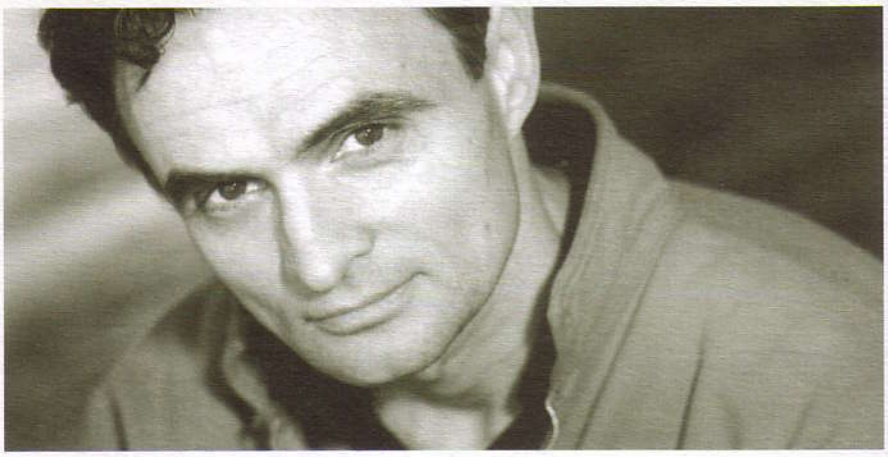
> Like paints on a palette, languages have their own vivid colours and nuances

Lefebvre also served as co-artistic director on the play, alongside unilingual Montreal anglophone Jack Langedijk, establishing communication with the actors and providing substantial creative input. The actors were open to the work and to their fellow artists, some of whom could not communicate well in the others' language.

Language was central, but it was not an interpersonal issue. As a result, Teesri Duniya's comfort level increased to a point where the newness of the crossover will, I believe, wear off in time. In the nature of real growth, this type of collaboration will eventually become routine practice.

The group's growth, like that of any individual, lay in the process. However, in the case of *L'Affaire Farhadi*, that process resulted in a product. The process that nurtured openness created a product that engaged a whole new audience that had been previously unable to fully participate.

The product in question was interesting to me. I had seen *Counter Offence* and, for me, the reaction it provoked was modest. I felt the reach of the play was held back by language. Here was a situation that addressed the entire Montreal community, diverse and mainstream, yet only a narrow band of the population could play in it or watch it with a significant degree of involvement.


L'Affaire Farhadi co-artistic director Jack Langedijk

The play included francophone, allophone and anglophone characters, but the non-English languages and their nuances were left unexpressed, and the interaction between them—such a vital feature of this city—was sublimated as a result.

Like paints on a palette, languages have their own vivid colours and nuances. When I see francophone characters delivering lines in English—lines that were written in English—I think of how much more vibrant the play would be if those characters spoke from within their francophone language and experience.

I know this would have limitations. For example, it would be impossible to maintain multiple languages on a main stage in Toronto because few people would understand. I also know that minority language groups who produce plays in their own languages cannot hope to reach beyond their own linguistic communities.

A rare opportunity

But in an imperfect world, Montreal offers a remarkably unique opportunity for several reasons. Montrealers whose mother tongue is neither French nor English generally have one or both of those languages as their second language. In fact, many people here, unlike in most other Canadian cities, easily accommodate three languages without a thought to the effort.

> The marriage of languages at the level of everyday life in this city is a window of opportunity for the creative communities here.

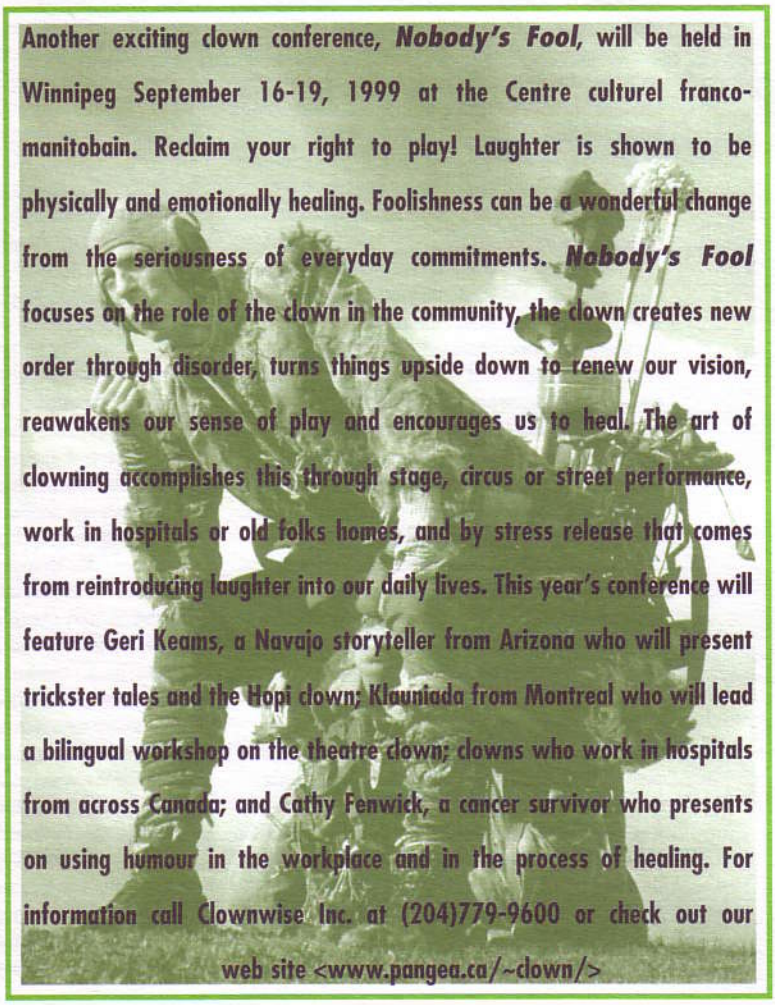
In addition, people educated in Montreal frequently interact in French and English, or at least have a basic grasp of each language. Another important feature of Montreal is that French and English—especially French—offer lines of convergence along which diverse communities can share and debate their concerns.

In short, the marriage of languages at the level of everyday life in this city is a window of opportunity for the creative communities here. Still, after so many years, there is little collaboration.

Everyone in this town knows there's an anglophone arts community and a francophone arts community. From the outside, it doesn't make sense. In my opinion, artists are overlooking an incredible source of energy and vitality that comes only when they make contact with identities outside their own and move fluidly between the two, contributing their ideas and being reciprocated with others' thoughts.

Contact and fluidity are even more important for socially relevant plays that attempt to provoke reflection and debate by holding a proverbial mirror up to their societies. In Montreal, speaking with the voice of one language is like throwing a sheet over much of the mirror.

L' Affaire Farhadi gives us a mirror as genuine and complete as one could hope for. French, English and minority languages weave in and out of each other as seamlessly as on a Montreal subway. Suddenly, the words of each character find a fresh resonance for anyone experiencing the rare treat this play offers. ●



Another exciting clown conference, *Nobody's Fool*, will be held in Winnipeg September 16-19, 1999 at the Centre culturel franco-manitobain. Reclaim your right to play! Laughter is shown to be physically and emotionally healing. Foolishness can be a wonderful change from the seriousness of everyday commitments. *Nobody's Fool* focuses on the role of the clown in the community, the clown creates new order through disorder, turns things upside down to renew our vision, reawakens our sense of play and encourages us to heal. The art of clowning accomplishes this through stage, circus or street performance, work in hospitals or old folks homes, and by stress release that comes from reintroducing laughter into our daily lives. This year's conference will feature Geri Keams, a Navajo storyteller from Arizona who will present trickster tales and the Hopi clown; Klaunlada from Montreal who will lead a bilingual workshop on the theatre clown; clowns who work in hospitals from across Canada; and Cathy Fenwick, a cancer survivor who presents on using humour in the workplace and in the process of healing. For information call Clownwise Inc. at (204)779-9600 or check out our web site <www.pangea.ca/~clown/>

Theatre for the people, by the people

By Edward Little

Edward Little

Cultural diversity demands more representative art through cultural democracy

Writing for the first issue of **alt.theatre,** Rahul Varma wrote that "a common characteristic among many artists of diverse backgrounds is that, in most cases, their art is a creative response to issues of identity, dignity and representation."

On an aesthetic level, Varma argued that multiculturalism and diversity must be increasingly regarded as a "made-in-Canada idea" where the experiences of minority cultures, shaped by their varied Canadian social and geographic environments, find expression in the arts.

> Audiences for fine arts are either declining or not growing adequately, and...there is an urgent need to integrate the arts more deeply and widely in the broader community.
> —1997 CCA report

While inherently Canadian, such representations tend to be inflected with cultural and artistic traditions from the ancestral backgrounds of those involved. Of course, the nature and degree of access to opportunities for artists from diverse communities are key factors in nurturing this potentially varied and complex Canadian cultural aesthetic.

Varma pointed out that while recent changes in funding are providing greater opportunities for artists of diversity, alignments with community theatre, community organizations, variety shows and the like are often still used as tools in the artist's attempt to earn professional recognition from funding agencies.

For artists just arriving in Canada, and for emerging Canadian artists, working with community-based groups and organizations may be in large part a strategic initiative. But such activity can also contribute significantly to the development of cultural democracy as a primary means of resisting pressures of globalization which, for the most part, contradicts cultural diversity.

Cultural democracy occurs at the local level and involves the direct participation of individuals and communities in the creation of representations of their particular culture. Situated as a form of cultural production, it represents the opposite end of a spectrum from the democratization of culture—making so-called high art available to the masses.

On the contrary, according to Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*, in terms of identity, cultural democracy assumes that "community is the necessary mediating element between the individual and the larger society." Its practice often places professional and emerging artists in direct contact with groups that are actively seeking to develop a creative, collective voice.

The potential benefits of this contact, in terms of promoting diversity of representation in Canadian arts, become clearer when considered in light of the findings of the Arts in Transition Report, released by the Canadian Conference of the Arts in October 1997.

The CCA report, funded by the Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation and The Department of Canadian Heritage, concluded that audiences for fine arts are either declining or not growing adequately, and that there is an urgent need "to integrate the arts more deeply and widely in the broader community." Furthermore, the report indicated, "unless the work of an arts organization is rooted in and meaningful to its community, its survival is precarious."

The report stressed the need for meaningful participation in art—as distinct from spectatorship alone—and suggested arts groups and artists must do more to engage with the increasing cultural diversity of the country. Education, training, and funding of artists in Canada, however, continue to emphasise modernist traditions, which place primary value on the artist as solitary creator.

As the report pointed out, this model, which is overwhelmingly oriented to the development of artistic skills, "has produced and continues to produce many exceptional artists and works of art. But many younger artists find it confining, unable to accommodate their desires to work more closely with communities and incorporate social and ecological issues into their art."

Cultural democracy directly addresses the report's primary concerns in this regard. It advocates local ownership and empowerment, emphasises professional involvement in collective and collaborative approaches to representation and, through widespread local participation, creates the potential for an inherently dialogic exchange of professional artistic skills, local knowledge, and diverse representations of identity.

Furthermore, placing artists and communities in contact with each other to work towards the common goal of producing work of the highest possible artistic standards can be an important step in the development and nurturing of new audiences.

Keith Kelly, director of planning and research at the Canada Council—and former national director of the CCA—appears to agree. Being quoted in an article in *The Halifax Daily News*, Kelly cited Vancouver's Firehall theatre, located in the heart of a large Asian community, as a positive example of arts groups adapting to new audiences. The theatre offers its stage to local groups, and even uses neighbourhood people in its productions.

In Kelly's words, such activity is a positive step towards "undermining the model of the arts as a self-important elite responsible only to its own artistic integrity."

Kelly's remarks point to a central obstacle to cultural democracy—a climate of ongoing tension between popular and mainstream approaches to cultural production. While I believe the two must be seen as complementary and interdependent, they are more often construed as competing and mutually exclusive, especially in times of shrinking support for the arts.

This kind of binary thinking contributes to cultural and social polarization, and inhibits discussion of the ideological implications of these two positions relative to expressions of diversity.

The debate takes shape

The terms cultural democracy and democratization of culture gained prominence during a high-profile debate in Britain in the mid 1980s, when the Thatcher government was gutting British Arts funding, particularly for groups and individuals engaged in expressions of cultural democracy.

On one side of the debate was Roy Shaw,

retired secretary general of the British Arts Council. Advocating the democratization of culture, Shaw called for wider public access to the high arts through education and various policies of touring, regional funding, and networking.

In Shaw's view, as he was quoted in *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*, art should transcend such differences as class by appealing to our "common humanity." The sophistication of high art, however, means that in order to "inherit culture, you have to make an effort, sometimes a considerable one," so education must be "the prime factor in facilitating greater access to the arts."

Contrasting Shaw's position, Owen Kelly's vision of cultural democracy called for "direct participation in the production of a living culture." Kelly, a London-based community artist and former chair of the Greater London Council's Community Arts Panel, distrusted Shaw's scheme for the democratization of culture as a system for the "popularization of an already decided cultural agenda."

In Kelly's view, this meant "the values of one particularly powerful group" would be imposed on the larger society through the consumption of a centrally coordinated cultural package. Kelly believed this package, often referred to as serious art, tended to mask its intent to legitimize an "agreed hierarchy of values" by making them appear neutral, or natural.

The following excerpt from *Community, Art, and the State: Storming the Citadels*, which Kelly wrote in 1984, illustrates his belief that cultural democracy is a means of resisting such hegemony:

> (It is) an idea which revolves around the notion of plurality, and around equality of access to the means of cultural production and distribution. It assumes that cultural production happens in the context of wider social discourses, and that where the cultural production arises out of, and feeds back into, these wider discourses, it will produce not only pleasure but knowledge . . . (which) will accrue to the primary understanding of community.

Shaw's central criticism of cultural democracy is that it tends to "underestimate the difficulty and exaggerate the value of self-expression in the arts," creating an aesthetic in which relevance becomes more important than quality. Shaw's remarks, however, ignore the degree to which relevance—or representation—must be seen as a precondition for quality art.

He implies a binary separation of quality and relevance, which can be projected onto a comparative hierarchy of values thus:

Relevance	**Quality**
Cultural expression	Art
Communalism	Liberal individualism
Cultural democracy	Democratization of culture

For Shaw, the two sets of values can co-exist, but only as separate practices. For Kelly, they must co-exist because they are the central values informing the "processes of production" and the "products of consumption," respectively.

By reinforcing binary sets of values, the polarized nature of the debate—in essence one of process versus product—obscures the degree to which the products of past cultural expression contribute to the creation of conventional notions of art and quality which, in turn, inform cultural democracy for individual participants.

Characteristically, however, cultural democracy is not readily exportable. In Britain, in the 1980s, it was bucking the tide of Thatcherist "economic internationalist." In the book *The Thatcher Effect: A Decade of Change*, Bryan Appleyard characterized this movement as "a turning away from the obsessions of Little England and a desire to produce internationally comprehensible and acclaimed art."

Cultural democracy offers a means for cultural expression to serve as the basis for a truly active dialogue between artists, the arts, and their communities.

Funding shifts offer hope

Shifts in Canadian arts funding over the past decade offer challenges and opportunities for cultural democracy. As in health care and education, the general funding trend in performing arts has involved shrinking overall budgets, downloading of costs by the federal government to provincial and municipal governments, and an increasing dependence on private sector or corporate sponsorship.

According to Statistics Canada, provincial funding for the performing arts has consistently outstripped federal contributions since 1992-93, and municipal funding accounts for an increasingly significant portion of the pie.

As Paul Gessel pointed out in *The Vancouver Sun* in August 1997, such shifts mean "arts administrators find themselves increasingly working in an environment trying to satisfy the demands of provincial, rather than federal, objectives."

To the extent that such changes encourage a more localized approach to cultural production, a greater public understanding of the benefits of cultural democracy should make it more attractive to provincial, regional, and municipal arts organizations and funding bodies.

On the federal front, the Canada Council's Artists and Communities pilot initiatives underway in Newfoundland, Ontario, and British Columbia offer potentially high-profile advocacy for cultural democracy. A formal national evaluation of these initiatives is being undertaken by the Laidlaw Foundation, and the CCA is recommending that the findings be distributed to public funding bodies and arts communities across the country.

One of these projects, the Enderby and district community play, is using the Colway community play model to involve hundreds of local residents from various cultural backgrounds—working with a professional team—in the creation and performance of a play representing a consensual vision of diversity within their geographic community.

Corporate sponsorship, however, will likely continue to be a tougher sell for projects advocating the representation and affirmation of local identities. Focusing on themes which may be seen as having limited appeal beyond their local constituencies—and mixing professional, semi-professional, and non-professional artists—is unlikely to appeal to agencies or corporations that subscribe solely to a modernist vision of the democratization of culture. Large corporations in particular will tend to be attracted to activities which model their own global philosophy and which will give them the widest possible exposure.

Our reality is to live in an age that increasingly relegates its citizens to the role of cultural consumer of globalized art while, as the CCA points out, audiences for Canadian work are not growing adequately. We might ask potential audiences why, but if an essential gap in communication already exists, how do we know who to ask, where to find them, and what language to use?

Cultural democracy offers a means for cultural expression to serve as the basis for a truly active dialogue between artists, the arts, and their communities. What will they talk about? Based on my experience of popular and participatory theatre, I suspect identity, dignity, and representation will be important themes. ●

Edward Little is a freelance director specializing in large-scale community projects, and has recently joined the Theatre Department at Concordia University as an associate professor and coordinator of a new specialization in Drama for Human Development.

Défolkloriser l'Afrique

Tout bas...si bas à La Licorne

Par Paul Lefebvre

La présence du théâtre africain francophone est, il faut en convenir, un peu faible à Montréal. En 1987, l'École nationale de théâtre a invité le dramaturge et metteur en scène ivoirien Bernard Zadi Zaourou à monter sa *Guerre des femmes* avec les finissants de la section française. Plus récemment, le Théâtre des Deux Mondes et Trans-Théâtre ont respectivement créé *Les Nuages de terre* et *Prise de sang* en collaboration avec des compagnies de théâtre africaines, grâce à la Commission internationale du théâtre francophone.

Le Centre des auteurs dramatiques a organisé à plusieurs reprises des événements avec des dramaturges africains, qui ont, entre autres, fait connaître l'écriture brillante de Sony Labou Tansi. C'est à l'occasion du plus récent de ces événements, Lectures Francophones, présenté lors de l'édition 1997 du Festival de théâtre des Amériques, que Tout bas...si bas de Koulsy Lamko a été lu, ainsi que l'explosive Bintou, de Koffi Kwahulé.

Le Théâtre de la Manufacture (qui gère La Licorne) et le Théâtre des Gens d'en Bas, une compagnie audacieuse installée dans le village du Bic en Gaspésie, se sont unies pour produire *Tout bas...si bas* dont les représentations montréalaises ont eu lieu en octobre dernier. C'était la première fois qu'un texte francophone africain était présenté dans un théâtre reconnu, bénéficiant de plus d'une mise en scène brillante et audacieuse de la part de Martin Faucher, un metteur en scène reconnu pour son travail remarquable dans le domaine du théâtre de création.

> « Des auteurs africains que j'ai rencontré, Koulsy Lamko était celui qui se rapprochait le plus du barde; un mélange de conteur et de musicien. »
> — Lise Vaillancourt, dramaturge.

Lamko est né au Tchad en 1959, et vit au Burkina Faso depuis 1983. Dramaturge, comédien, metteur en scène, nouvelliste et conteur, Lamko est le fondateur de Kaleido Culture, un organisme voué à l'animation de projets culturels.

Depuis 1990, Lamko a signé 13 pièces dont *La Ziggourat de Babel*, *Exils*, *Aurore*, et *Celle des îles*. Ses pièces, publiées aux éditions Lansman, ont été jouées en Afrique et en France.

« Des auteurs africains que j'ai rencontré, » la dramaturge Lise Vaillancourt a écrit, « Koulsy Lamko était celui qui se rapprochait le plus du barde; un mélange de conteur et de musicien. »

Lamko est aussi engagé dans la difficile vie politique africaine. En 1998, il s'est rendu au Rwanda avec 11 autres écrivains pour recueillir des témoignages sur les massacres. *Tout bas...si bas*, sans faire écho directement aux événements du Rwanda, rend toutefois compte de façon métaphorique de la très dure situation politique de l'Afrique en ce moment.

Car *Tout bas...si bas* est le produit d'une Afrique qui, après l'euphorie de la décolonisation des années soixante, est aujourd'hui marquée par les ravages de la corruption, de politiques inadéquates et de l'exil, qui provoquent dans les populations un terrible sentiment d'impuissance et de découragement. C'est cette Afrique tombée « Tout bas...si bas » qui a donné naissance au texte de Lamko. Pour faire descendre son père d'un arbre où il s'est retiré du monde, une fillette imagine la naissance miraculeuse d'un enfant aux bras couverts de signes magiques. Alerté par la rumeur, un journaliste se présente dans le Quartier des Accroupis, où l'événement a eu lieu. Puis arrivent un imam, un évêque, un militaire, ainsi que la mairesse de la ville; tous tentent, par corruption, de s'approprier la puissance de cet enfant aux pouvoirs surnaturels.

À travers la pièce—et surtout à travers le personnage ambigu du journaliste—l'auteur dresse le portrait d'une société où la population, découragée, est prête à croire aux espoirs les plus improbables et où les pouvoirs politiques et religieux n'ont aucun scrupules à manipuler ces croyances.

L'origine de *Tout bas...si bas* a beau être africaine, ce n'est pas une pièce qui renvoie exclusivement à l'Afrique, tout comme, par exemple, *En attendant Godot* ne renvoie pas spécifiquement à la situation des clochards dans le Sud de la France dans les années d'après-guerre.

Ainsi, pour sa mise en scène, Faucher a pris une position radicale, d'ailleurs applaudie par l'auteur: utiliser une distribution entièrement blanche. Car Faucher voulait à tout prix éviter une folklorisation de la pièce et de son propos, insistant sur l'universalité de la fable plutôt que sur sa dimension africaine. Outre le fait qu'il aurait été difficile, voire impossible, de rassembler une distribution professionnelle entièrement noire, Faucher voulait dissocier la pièce de la notion de négritude qui, dans la fable, n'intervient pas.


Photo par Les Paparazzi

Paul Lefebvre

Loin de toute idée de récupération ou, pire, de mépris envers les artistes noirs, son choix de mise en scène par rapport à la distribution affirmait de façon audacieuse qu'un parole africaine n'est pas nécessairement liée à la couleur de la peau.

Une question complexe

Cette décision soulève la question du coulour blind casting dans le théâtre francophone montréalais. C'est une question complexe. Contrairement à New York, qui a vu la naissance de cette pratique (qui a été particulièrement développée par le Public Theatre alors que feu Joseph Papp le

dirigeait), il n'y a pas encore ici un très grand nombre de comédiens issus de minorités visibles pouvant jouer professionnellement en français. Ce qui peut contrecarrer le désir de certains producteurs qui veulent donner une images ethniquement diversifiée de la société représentée sur scène.

Par exemple, lorsque le metteur en scène Pierre Collin a monté récemment *Des souris et des hommes* au Théâtre Denise-Pelletier, il souhaitait avoir une distribution multiethnique, à l'image de la Californie des années trente où convergeaient des travailleurs d'origines très diverses ; or, il n'a pas pu aller aussi loin qu'il le désirait dans cette direction.

Le véritable color blind casting, où la couleur de la peau devient non significative, progresse lentement mais sans résistance. En février 1999, lorsque la compagnie Jean Duceppe (le plus gros théâtre mainstream de Montréal) a présenté *Bluff*, qui met en scène des amis jouant au poker, un des personnages était interprété par le comédien noir Widemir Normil.

Or, ce personnage n'était pas spécifiquement écrit pour un Noir. Ce qui est intéressant, c'est que personne n'a relevé le fait dans les médias et la compagnie n'a fait aucune publicité sur le sujet. Que des Québécois de souche française aient un ami noir et que la couleur de sa peau ne fasse l'objet d'aucune discussion a été acceptée tant par le public que par la critique. La multiethnicité entre dans la normalité et c'est très bien ainsi.

Un spectacle d'un grande splendeur visuelle

Si l'Afrique était présente dans *Tout bas...si bas*, c'était à travers des éléments relevant davantage de l'évocation que de l'illustration. (Le spectacle était d'un grande splendeur visuelle, en particulier grâce à la très élégante scénographie de Raymond Marius Boucher, caressée par les lumières d'André Rioux.)

La présence du sable et de l'arbre dans la scénographie renvoyaient à l'Afrique, ainsi que l'extraordinaire travail musical de Maryse Poulin. En fait, le travail de la musicienne indiquait le type d'interculturalisme que Faucher a amené dans sa mise en scène. Car, en musique, les instruments et les influences musicales circulent d'une culture à l'autre avec une liberté que le théâtre, de par sa nature même, a de la difficulté à prendre.

L'intérêt de la pièce résidait cependant dans son propos et, aussi, dans sa dramaturgie. L'emploi de personnages emblématiques—le militaire, l'evêque, l'imam, etc.—est une un procédé délicat, qui mène trop souvent à une dramaturgie simpliste, univoque, immédiatement lisible.

Or, ce n'est pas le cas avec Lamko. Entre le père qui, dans son arbre, s'est symboliquement retiré du monde pour vivre dans la hauteur abstraite des idées (lui qui vit dans le Quartier des Accroupis), et les agouilleurs qui occupent le terrain du réel, il y a la fillette et le reporter.

Il y a celle qui croit que l'espoir peut venir d'un rêve qui ferait passer les gens de la pensée magique à l'action concrète et il y a celui qui connaît tous les mécanismes de la manipulation du discours.

Ce reporter, oscillant entre le cynisme et l'idéalisme, extrêmement conscient de son savoir et de son pouvoir, démontrait comment le discours porteur de libérations peut être en fait utilisé pour maintenir un statu quo. De là l'intérêt réel de *Tout bas...si bas*: il n'y a pas que l'Afrique qui souffre de la fabrication institutionnalisée des mensonges par des gens qui devraient être là pour la dénoncer. ●


Photo par Yves Renaud

L'élégance du décor ainsi que l'éclairage subtil ont contribués à rendre *Tous bas...si bas* visuellement magnigique.

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. Il a été récemment désigné adjoint au directeur artistique pour Teesri Duniya Theatre.

Tout bas... si bas, written by Koulsy Lamko.
Directed by Martin Faucher.
Set Design: Raymond Marius Boucher.
Costumes: Marc Sénécal.
Lighting: André Rioux.
Sound Design: Maryse Poulin.
Make-up and Wigs: Angelo Barsetti.
Props: Patricia Ruel.
Assistant-director and stage manager: Jean Gaudreau.
Cast: Valérie Blais, Patrice Coquereau, Luc Morissette, Muriel Dutil, Philippe Cousineau, Stéphane Demers, Gérald Gagnon, and Maryse Poulin.
A co-production of Théâtre de la Manufacture and Théâtre les Gens d'en Bas, presented at the Licorne Theatre, October 13 through November 7, 1998.

Deconstructing African Folklore:

Tout bas...si bas at the Licorne Theatre

By Paul Lefebvre
Translated by Anne-Marie Laliberté

It is true to say that the presence of African francophone theatre in Montreal is somewhat subdued. In 1987, the National Theatre School invited Ivorian playwright and director Bernard Zadi Zaourou to stage his play, *La Guerre des femmes*, with the graduating students of the school's French section. More recently, Théâtre des Deux Mondes and Trans-Théâtre created *Les Nuages de terre* and *Prise de sang*, respectively, in collaboration with African theatre companies and the support of the Commission Internationale du Théâtre Francophone.

"Of all the African playwrights that I've met, Koulsy Lamko was the one most closely resembling a bard. He's both a storyteller and musician." — Lise Vaillancourt, playwright.

On many occasions, Le Centre des auteurs dramatiques has organized events showcasing African playwrights. These events have, among other things, helped bring forward the outstanding talent of writer Sony Labou Tansi.

It was during one of these events, Lectures Francophones, presented at the 1997 Festival de théâtre des Amériques, that the play *Tout bas...si bas* by playwright Koulsy Lamko was presented in a public reading, along with the explosive Bintou by Koffi Kwahulé.

The Théâtre de la Manufacture (which manages La Licorne, a Montreal theatre space) and the Théâtre des Gens d'en Bas (a daring theatre company based in the village of Le Bic in the Gaspé) got together to produce *Tout bas...si bas* and perform it in Montreal last October.

For the first time, an African francophone script was played in a well-established theatre. The production also benefited from the brilliant and audacious direction of Martin Faucher, a director well known for his remarkable efforts in staging new works. Lamko was born in Tchad in 1959, and has lived in Burkina Faso since 1983. A multi-faceted playwright, actor, director, novelist and storyteller, Lamko is the founder of Kaleido Culture, an organization dedicated to the coordination of cultural projects. Since 1990, Lamko has written 13 plays, including *La Ziggoura de Babel*, *Exils*, *Aurore*, and *Celle des îles*. His plays, published by Les Éditions Lansman, have been staged in Africa and in France.

"Of all the African playwrights that I've met," said playwright Lise Vaillancourt, "Koulsy Lamko was the one most closely resembling a bard. He's both a storyteller and musician."

Lamko is also very active on the difficult African political scene. In 1998, he went to Rwanda with 11 other writers to collect verbal testimonies of the massacres there. Although not directly echoing the Rwanda events, *Tout bas...si bas* metaphorically depicts the harsh political situation prevalent in Africa today.

Tout bas...si bas is the product of an Africa which, in the aftermath of the euphoria triggered by the decolonization of the continent during the 1960s, is scarred by the ravages of corruption, inadequate policies and exile. These factors contribute to instill a terrible feeling of despair and powerlessness among the population.

Such is the Africa that inspired Lamko when writing his play—a continent that has fallen "very low...so low," as the title suggests.

In the play, because a young girl wants her father to come down from a tree where he has retired from the world, she imagines the miraculous birth of a child with magical marks on his arms.

Intrigued by the news, a reporter arrives in the Quartier des Accroupis (literally the Quarter of the crouched people), the part of town where the event occurred. An imam, an archbishop, a soldier and the female mayor of the town arrive soon after. Using

Photo by Yves Renaud

Elegant set design and subtle lighting made Tout bas...si bas visually magnificent.

bribery, they all try to appropriate the power of that child endowed with supernatural abilities.

Throughout the play—and mostly through the ambiguous character of the reporter—the author depicts a society where discouraged people are ready to believe in the most improbable hopes; a society where political and religious powers have no scruples in manipulating these beliefs.

Although *Tout bas…si bas* originates in Africa, the play does not pertain solely to Africa any more than *Waiting for Godot*, for example, refers solely to the predicament of tramps in the south of post-war France.

Accordingly, as a director, Faucher took a radical stand—an approach welcomed by the author himself—by choosing a cast composed of all white actors. Faucher was determined to avoid treating the play and its topic as mere folkloric representations. He wanted to underline the universality of the fable rather than its African dimension.

Besides the fact that it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to set up an all-black cast of professional actors, Faucher wanted to dissociate the play from the concept of negritude, which is irrelevant to the fable. Far from denying, or worse, showing contempt towards black artists, Faucher's choice of casting affirmed boldly that Africa's voice is not shaped primarily by color of skin.

Colour-blind casting presents complex issue

Faucher's casting decision raises the complex issue of colour-blind casting within Montreal's French theatre scene. Unlike in New York, which has seen the adoption of the practice (a practice developed extensively by the Public Theatre under the direction of the late Joseph Papp), there are still too few actors in Montreal from visible minorities that can play in French as professionals. This can deter some producers who might otherwise wish to present a multicultural image of society on stage.

For example, when director Pierre Collin recently staged *Des Souris et des Hommes* at Théâtre Denise-Pelletier, he would have liked to have a multiethnic cast to better reflect the California of the 1930s, when many workers of diverse backgrounds were converging in California. Unfortunately, he was unable to go as far as he wished.

Real colour-blind casting, where the colour of the skin becomes irrelevant, takes momentum slowly but without resistance. In February 1999, when the Compagnie Jean-Duceppe (the largest mainstream theatre in Montreal) presented *Bluff*, a play about friends playing poker, black actor Widemir Normil played one of the characters—a part that had not originally been written specifically for a black actor.

Interestingly, no mention of this was made in the media, and the company made no publicity about it. The idea that a Quebecer of French descent had a black friend in the play—and that the color of his skin was not an issue to be discussed—was accepted by the public and critics alike. Multiculturalism is entering normality, and that's all for the best.

Evocative African presence

If Africa was present in *Tout bas…si bas*, it was through elements that were more evocative than illustrative. The elegant set design by Raymond Marius Boucher and the subtle lighting by André Rioux made the production visually magnificent. The sand and the tree of the set, and the extraordinary musical score performed by Maryse Poulin, served to evoke Africa.

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In fact, the musician's work underlined the type of cultural interaction Faucher had brought to the play. Indeed, the music, instruments and musical influences from different backgrounds interwove with a freedom that theatre, in its inherent nature, has difficulty attaining.

The appeal of the play resided, however, mainly in its topic and in its dramaturgy. Generally, the use of emblematic characters (the soldier, the archbishop, the imam, etc.) is a delicate process that often leads to a simplistic, unidirectional and first-level comprehension of a play.

Such is not the case with Lamko. Between the father perched on a tree—who has symbolically withdrawn from the world to live in the abstract world of ideas—and the schemers who go about their petty business in the real world, there are the girl and the reporter. The girl believes hope can be found in a dream that can bring people out of the world of wishful thinking and into the world of concrete action. The reporter knows all about the mechanics of political manipulation. Wavering constantly between cynicism and idealism, and being very much aware of his own knowledge and power, the reporter demonstrates how a message carrying promises of freedoms can in fact be used to maintain a status quo.

The appeal of *Tout bas…si bas* lies entirely in that statement; Africa is not the only society suffering from the institutionalized fabrication of lies by people who should be there to expose those lies. ●

Paul Lefebvre is a director and translator. He teaches at the National Theatre School, and serves as literary manager at the Théâtre Denise-Pelletier. He has recently been appointed associate artistic director at Teesri Duniya Theatre.

A note on colour-blind casting

By using an all-white cast in an African francophone play, *Tout bas…si bas* director Martin Faucher offered a laudable example. As mentioned in the article above, Faucher was determined to avoid treating the play and its topic as mere folkloric representation. The question, however, arises whether a play can become "unfolkloric" by employing an all-white instead of an all-black cast.

In the hands of accomplished director like Faucher, the answer is yes. I believe that, in a multicultural society like Canada, such examples pave the way for multi-ethnic and colour-blind casting. Still, I cannot resist asking directors like Faucher, who believe in making our art scene "unfolkloric", if they would also use an all-black cast in a traditionally all-white play.

Indeed, the opportunity to produce an all-black play arises rarely, but all white plays are an every-day occurrence. I am hopeful that Faucher—and other directors who share his vision—would take such opportunities, however rare. Such artistic practices will not only avail much needed opportunities for black actors, but will also help us overcome the stereotypical mindset that tends to exist when casting plays. ●

Rahul Varma

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