vol.1, no.4 Oct 2000

alt. theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

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alt.theatre

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Special thanks to Heritage Canada for making this magazine possible.

alt.theatre is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre.Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec, National Library of Canada
ISSN 1481-0506.

Viewpoints expressed by the contributors are not necessarily those of the editor or the management of Teesri Duniya Theatre.

Submissions: Unsolicited submissions that do not exceed 1000 words are welcome, as is any feedback on recent articles. **alt.theatre** reserves the right to edit all submissions prior to publication. Submissions or article proposals should be sent to the editor of **alt.theatre** via the address above. Letters to the editor intended for publication are also welcome. Please include all pertinent information to allow us to contact you, and provide a stamped, self-addressed envelope if you would like your submission returned.

Subscriptions: Annual subscription rates (four issues) are as follows:
In Quebec: $10 (+ GST, PST)
Rest of Canada: $10 (+ GST)
U.S.A. or foreign: $25 (Canadian funds)
For inquiries and subscriptions, please write, email or fax Teesri Duniya Theatre.

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Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

Editorial: To What End?

Striving to be Obsolete, or Struggling to Stay Significant

At a meeting I attended some time ago, a provocative thought was voiced in reference to the ultimate goal of *alt.theatre* and other such initiatives aimed at the celebration and promotion of culturally diverse theatre and/or other means of expression for ethnic artists. To paraphrase, the statement was that our efforts—as a group of people interested in promoting and supporting the work of ethnic artists—will cease to be necessary once our ultimate goal of equality for ethnic artists is reached. After all, in this person's view, if and when ethnic artists no longer need to struggle against political discrimination or fight to be heard over the loudspeaker that is the status quo, why would we invest time and effort into calling for rights of such ethnic artists? In other words, once ethnic artists are accepted into the mainstream or, better, seen as equally important as the mainstream, the fight will be over.

This revealing statement was at once alarming and thought-provoking. In my last editorial in the pages of *alt.theatre*, I outlined the difference between the mere acceptance of something and the celebration of that thing as special and invaluable. Now, I realize an equally important distinction must be drawn between having an ultimate goal as an end-point and having an ongoing goal as a mission statement and driving motivation. Put simply, the ongoing goal of *alt.theatre* and other such initiatives is to ensure that ethnic artists and their work receive the recognition and acknowledgement they deserve as such important parts of our rich Canadian culture. Understood properly in this way, this ongoing goal clearly cannot become obsolete if and when ethnic artists and their works are widely celebrated and acknowledged as equally important parts of the Canadian arts scene. This would, after all, be akin to the suggestion that education is no longer necessary after one has learned something, or that exploration is no longer necessary once something has been discovered.

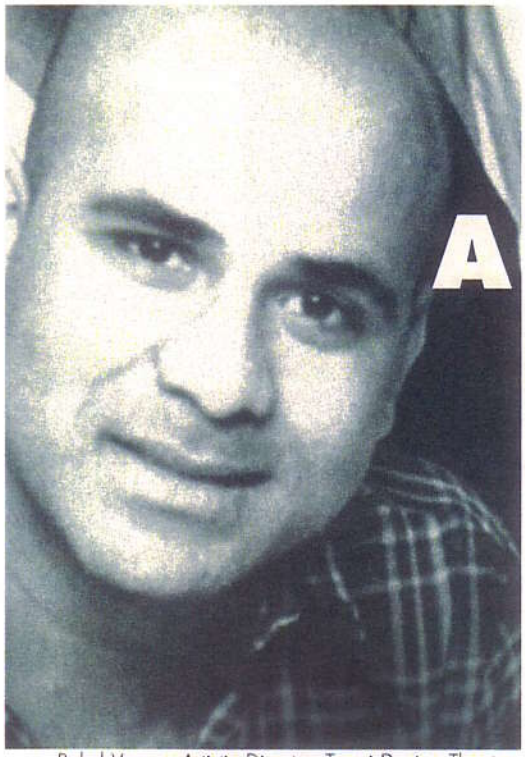
In his article in this issue of *alt.theatre* (page 4), Rahul Varma writes, among other things, about the importance of properly defining and applying the concept of democratization of culture. He explains the need of struggling ethnic practitioners to have a true cultural democracy that offers training programs, resources and support with the goal of providing equality and a sense of stability. Certainly, the institutional policies of recognition Varma writes about could not simply cease to exist once ethnic artists become more appropriately acknowledged. To suggest this would undermine the very integrity with which Varma argues these policies must be carried out.

Another example of the necessarily ongoing nature of *alt.theatre*'s goal can be found by examining Ted Little's article (page 8) focusing on Concordia University's new Drama for Human Development (DFHD) program. This specialization, Little writes, seeks to prepare students to participate in a wider range of social, cultural, intercultural and aesthetic contexts. A strong focus is on each student's recognition and understanding of their role as cultural workers, and of their role and function as artists in the community. It is clear that, based on such an understanding of artists as integral parts of a living, breathing cultural society, training in the arts must remain relevant, growing and changing with that culture in a symbiotic fashion. In other words, the DFHD program would do a disservice to past and future students by ceasing to offer insight into the intricate workings of its constantly changing surrounding culture. In much the same way, *alt.theatre* and other such initiatives would fail in their mission statements if they became inactive and out of touch with contemporary environments in which they function.

Similarly, the role of theatre as an opposition party to parties in governmental power, as described by Ken Smedley in his discussion of the late George Ryga's work (page 14), should not be forgotten or dismissed as ethnic artists achieve goals in the face of the status quo. In this light, it would obviously be irresponsible of alternative theatre (or the initiatives supporting it) to turn its back on up-and-coming practitioners seeking to carry the same strong voice for future generations. Nor could Lina de Guevara and PUENTE Theatre (page 12) stop representing the shared experiences of immigrants as long as people are leaving their homes to struggle and cope in a foreign and intimidating new home.

No worthwhile initiative ceases to be important once it achieves success, no matter the degree of that success. The celebration and promotion of ethnic artists and their work will remain of paramount importance for as long as these artists continue in their creative efforts. Their work will never be less special, and there will never be too much support for that work. Our struggle will never be obsolete.

Russell Krackovitch



Rahul Varma, Artistic Director, Teesri Duniya Theatre.

A Long Way To Go

Institutional Changes Marred by Old Attitudes

In her inaugural speech as Canada's Governor General, Adrian Clarkson commented on–among other things–Canada's openness, cultures, languages and immigrant roots. An ex-refugee of Chinese origin, Clarkson praised Canada for absorbing immigrants and refugees from around world who choose Canada, over other rich countries, to call home.

Publicly, most Canadians applauded Clarkson's appointment as one of many concrete gestures demonstrating a gradual recognition of multiculturalism and cultural minorities. But privately, some felt that, although she was the most deserving candidate for the post, Clarkson's appointment was an act designed to appease "multiculturalists."

Multiculturalism has triggered passionate debates in recent years, in public institutions, universities and even within some private corporations. Some argue that multiculturalism has been the motivating force behind the increased demand for recognition on behalf of minority cultures. They argue that underlying the politics of multiculturalism is a genuine desire to meet the societal needs of minority communities—needs which these communities claim can be realized only through political recognition of their respective cultural identities.

The essence of this argument is that political recognition of particular cultures, ethnic groups, genders and sexual orientations is essential for the professional recognition and development of individuals from those groups. Consequently, the struggle for recognition of particular cultural identities (as this term is understood by diverse communities in a broad sense, *i.e.*, who they are as people and what fundamental characteristics, history and values define them as human beings) has become the primary occupation for many members of these groups.

The competing viewpoint maintains that political recognition of ethnicity, culture, gender and sexual orientation is not necessary for equality and dignity. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that a liberal democracy, such as Canada, is already committed to the principle of equality. The right to vote, freedom of association, the right to hold public office, as well as universal health care, free speech and political liberty are freely and equally granted to everybody. So, the whole idea of recognizing particular cultural identities of citizens is not only unnecessary, but "undemocratic," as well. For those espousing this viewpoint, freedom and equality refer only to pre-determined universal needs and common characteristics. Diverse cultural identities, gender and sexual politics do not merit formal recognition in the eyes of proponents of this school of thought. While some propose a link between political recognition and fulfillment of the needs of emerging and professional artists from diverse communities, others are outright opposed to it. For example, in the year-end issue of *Saturday Night* magazine, right-wing commentator David Frum denounced Canada's policy of cultural diversity as the "biggest mistake of the century."

This debate brings to the forefront some important questions: Which of the above viewpoints are essential for the survival and professional needs of minority cultures? Do we need to legislate the survival of specific cultural groups? Can we treat all theatre artists as equals and still recognize their cultural specificity?

Cultural Democracy vs. Cultural Practice

Amid the two competing viewpoints, current public policy seems to show a gradual tendency towards the political recognition of identities based on culture, ethnicity and race. This "multicultural shift" may be a result of political pressure and/or our preoccupation with identity, needs, and recognition. And while characterizing this movement as a multicultural shift may be an exaggeration, institutional readjustments certainly are visible within our public offices, art bodies and educational curricula. Some of these adjustments have been motivated by the struggle to equalize cultures, and some by a desire to combat entrenched racist attitudes. In 1990, for example, the Canada Council brought forth guidelines to implement racial equality in the arts. The extent to which this equality has been achieved is still a matter of debate, but the changes cannot be ignored. Only within the last decade was a note that the Council's programs are open to all cultures added to its official forms. Today, ostensibly, artists are not prevented from competing on cultural grounds, and this is a major step forward. Similarly, another central institution, the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), now has a standing committee on Cultural Diversity. The committee is composed of various artistic directors from across the country, under the leadership of Kate Bligh, artistic director of the Black Theatre Workshop Montreal.

There are, of course, more institutional changes happening in this area than those outlined here. It is noteworthy that these changes—sometimes in the form of legislation—are coming in the name of dignity, equality and egalitarianism. In the last issue of *alt.theatre*, Edward Little referred to these changes as steps to democratize our cultural policy in a manner he conceptualizes as "cultural democracy," or an approach to cultural production demanding equal status for the various cultures that comprise Canada. However, Little's concept of cultural democracy cannot be achieved merely by political recognition and corresponding adjustments in central institutions. Rather, its success will be determined also by the political will of those in a position to truly implement such an approach and by the degree to which the present artistic hierarchy collaborates in its implementation.

To shed more light on these points, I will share my experience at an information session organized recently in Montreal by the Canada Council for the Arts. The intention was to popularize new initiatives, and to allow theatre officers from national, provincial and municipal art bodies to outline their respective policies with respect to cultural diversity. A roomful of artists of color attended this information session, and the theatre officers encouraged those attending to take advantage of new programs. As a point of information, the officer from the Canada Council noted that, since the implementation of the racial equality policy in the arts, there had been an increase in the number of applicants seeking support, and a corresponding success rate. The officer pointed out that support for cultural diversity had been assigned a strategic priority in all disciplines of the Council's work, and that the benefactors of this policy would be black Canadians, Asian Canadians and aboriginal communities. The officer further assured those attending that other cultural communities could be added to the list as the Council continues to scan the cultural map of Canada. He also named successful artists from cultural communities who, he said, could be regarded as role models for up-and-coming artists.

Was this an example of cultural democracy in action? Yes, it was. Yet there is no democratizing society that is not marred with controversies, skepticism and dissatisfaction, quite often stemming from the same people who are supposed to be its primary benefactors. That is exactly what I witnessed following the formal part of the information session, when an informal discussion continued among those participants who decided to stay. This informal discussion was blunt and unrestrained, as participants questioned if and how democratization, political recognition, racial-equality, and the multiculturalist shift have really changed things. Apart from the officers, those remaining in the room shared two things in common worthy of mention. First, all were art-practitioners, and second, all depended on and had received financial and in-kind support from their respective cultural communities. At the same time, a tally revealed that only two among them had ever received arts funding.

Objectively speaking, democratization doesn't, and shouldn't, ensure rewards to every individual, even if the individual is from the target group. But if the process of democratization is to be applied with integrity, it must result in a foolproof system that ensures equal opportunities—if not individual rewards—to every culturally underprivileged artist and/or group on the basis of a common criteria.

Tokenism Precludes Cultural Evolution

Having said that, the aforementioned informal discussion was disturbing in the sense that it highlighted the question of tokenism. A feeling pervaded that the two grant recipients were token figures who not only received funding "year after year," but also served the councils as secure "alibis" against the lack of funding for the rest. One person argued that funding bodies habitually supported these token figures rather than expanding the field with new faces. She elaborated that it was easier to reward a couple of recurring "alibis" than to truly respect an ongoing process of cultural evolution to remove the historical obstacles that diverse artists continue to face.

This situation not only prevents a large majority of minority artists from feeling a part of Canada's cultural franchise, but also can create an accusatory and divisive climate that promotes an unhealthy form of competition within various cultural groups. The message could not be clearer. Struggling practitioners don't need role models to succeed. They need the establishment of a true cultural democracy—one that will offer them the training programs, resources, and support that will bring them to par with so-called role models within their own cultures, and will give them some sense of the stability experienced by the dominant cultures. It is evident from this experience that the success of institutional policies of recognition will not be determined by making an example of a successful few, but by acknowledging and rewarding the potential of the struggling many.

To further explore the issues raised above, we must examine why social scientists, academic/practitioners (like Little), certain feminists and members of cultural minorities (like myself) are obsessively concerned with cultural democracy and political recognition. Two reasons come immediately to mind. First, over the years, multiculturalism has gone through various stages, starting with the exoticism of ethnic costumes, food and fashion, moving towards self-discovery and self-affirmation, growing to include race-relations, and finally maturing in the form of demands for equal status for all cultures. The second reason proceeds from the first; the demand for equal status for all cultures is not a matter of concessions to minority cultures, but rather a vital artistic need. Our obsession with the issue is a response to our recurring experience that policies aimed at the advancement of minority cultures often lack the material support necessary to implement them. Insufficient action disguised in the form of an initiative not only creates a stereotypically false perception of the advancement of minorities, but demonstrates a lack of respect for underprivileged cultures. Some would describe this as a form of oppression.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Not too long ago, Sally Han, theatre director and a former theatre officer at the Canada Council, convened a National Networking Meeting of culturally diverse artists. Over 25 playwrights, Artistic Directors, and individual artists from diverse cultural communities met in Toronto. They were joined by representatives from the cultural diversity wing of PACT and CAEA, as well as the Executive Director of the Playwrights Union of Canada, Angela Rebeiro. The meeting was the first of its kind and, by all indications, a serious affair seeking serious results. Jean Louis-Roux, head of the Canada Council, sat through most of the proceedings before announcing the creation of a new post for a theatre officer responsible for culturally diverse artists and companies.

All in all, the meeting provided a sense of mutual empowerment to the participants who shared experiences, artistry and challenges. By design, the meeting wasn't a policy session; the policy of strategic priority already was in effect. In practical terms, the meeting aimed to inform participant's about "who's who" in the culturally diverse art-scene, allowing them to make connections and embark on joint ventures, pick-up plays and projects suited to their interests. In these regards, the meeting was highly successful. At the same time, however, systemic inequalities became manifest as it became evident that hardly any of the participants had the material resources or the infrastructure necessary to embark upon the kinds of possibilities presented by the meeting. It reminded me of a situation in my country of birth, India, where primary education is constitutionally free, but there are no guarantees that every village will be supplied with a school.

Insufficient action disguised in the form of an initiative not only creates a stereotypically false perception of the advancement of minorities, but demonstrates a lack of respect for underprivileged cultures. Some would describe this as a form of oppression.

To take another example, Rebeiro, who has done a commendable job in the area of minority, women and First Nation publishing, was asked during the meeting to answer a question about "sub-enthusiastic" marketing and the promotion of minority plays and playwrights. Rebeiro responded that, since "minority publishing was given preferential treatment at the present time," many publishing houses were not as interested in the promotion of culturally diverse artists as they were in accessing public funding. As diverse artists, we experience this situation regularly in different forms. For example, the sudden rise of interest among the dominant cultural organizations,

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The Reading Hebron Community Project:

An Exercise in Intercultural Outreach

by Edward Little

In May 2000, Teesri Duniya, in collaboration with Montreal Arts Interculturels (MAI), mounted the Montreal premiere of Jason Sherman's award-winning play, *Reading Hebron*.

Sherman wrote the script in response to the February 25, 1994 massacre in which Dr. Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish settler living in Kirya Arba, opened fire in the Muslim section of the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing 29 people who had been praying. While the play deals with some very specific historical and contemporary issues, the script is not too concerned with an examination of actual events in the Middle East. Rather, it is an exploration of the human face behind the issues. Accordingly, the play follows one man's quest for self-knowledge as the central character, Nathan Ambromowitz, sets out to discover if he, as a Jewish Canadian, is in some way implicated in Goldstein's actions.

Teesri Duniya is committed to the production of plays reflecting a multicultural and multi-racial vision of Canada. The company saw the production of *Hebron* as an opportunity to raise awareness about relationships between the Palestinian and Jewish communities in the Middle East and Canada, and to promote discussion concerning the broader experience of Diaspora of interest to all Canadians. Eschewing more commercial marketing strategies, Teesri sought to promote the socio-political potential of the play—ways in which the production might be used to help build links between concerned individuals and communities in Canada interested in exploring the potential of theatre to enhance intercultural representation and communication around socially significant issues. Accordingly, the company set out to increase public involvement in the project, and to extend the timeframe of discussion, debate, and action to include the periods leading up to, during and following the actual performances of the play.

I designed the *Reading Hebron* Community Project as a pilot initiative in response to these needs. The lessons and experience of this project will be used to create similar initiatives responding to future Teesri productions. The *Hebron* Project was guided by the belief that public participation in the conception, planning, and realization of activities surrounding and connected to the actual production of *Hebron* would open new channels of communication, foster greater intercultural representation, and contribute to a heightened appreciation of the relevance of theatre arts and their ability to contribute to social dialogue and well-being.

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after the news spread that there was money for culturally diverse theatrical work, makes me question the intention behind the interest. I would concede, however, that whatever the intention behind this sudden interest, this is a de facto good thing for those minority artists who benefit from it. I would also add that what disturbs me more about dominant cultural organizations is not their money-motivated interest in culturally diverse work, but their depreciatory attitude and hidden lack of respect for those cultures.

The Universal Definition Of Quality

An even more recent example that comes to mind involves Teesri Duniya's critically acclaimed production of Jason Sherman's Reading Hebron. Wajdi Mouawad, who is acclaimed as a highly accomplished actor, director, and writer of Lebanese descent, directed the show. In speaking of Wajdi, Dominique Champagne, another genius of Quebec theatre, told *The Montreal Gazette*'s theatre critic, Pat Donnelly, that "the capacity of Quebec culture to integrate newcomers is going to determine the future of our society. But the process should not be forced. I worked with Wajdi Mouawad not because he was Lebanese but because he was a good artist."

Wajdi is, indeed, a good artist; he is one of our brightest all-round theatre practitioners. But if we look at Champagne's comments from another perspective, they illustrate a need to respond to deeply held stereotypes about minority art and artists. Champagne's remark that he worked with Mouawad not because of Mouawad's ethnic origin, but rather because of the quality of his art, suggests two things. First, it means that, with the exception of Mouawad, there are no other ethnic artists who possess the quality to work within the theatrical hierarchy. Second, Champagne's comment suggests that all non-ethnic artists who find work must be of a superior artistic caliber.

I must add here that I sincerely and truthfully believe Canada has many artists of great caliber. My interpretation of Champagne's comments is not meant to undermine non-ethnic actors, but rather to react against the stereotypes informing the standards by which the cultural hierarchy disallows ethnic artists from finding work and then rationalizes such exclusions on the basis of quality. I believe the pursuit of artistic quality should be the primary reason behind artistic activity, and that the criteria for quality must be applied universally to all artists. Why is the word "quality" persistently coupled with such descriptive modifiers as "Lebanese" or "Asian" when one talks about an ethnic artist or their work, yet used alone whenever one mentions an artist from the dominant culture. What is behind a mindset that must compulsively qualify quality through a description of ethnicity? And what is behind flashing the names of successful ethnic artists like Mouawad, Dejanet Sears and Thomson Highway? I would offer this explanation: they are all exceptionally good. I can say that Mouawad, who I know personally, is not simply good in comparison to many ethnic artists; he outshines some of the best non-ethnic, too.

Yet, using Mouawad as a standard to be met is detrimental to up-and-coming ethnic artists and established non-ethnic artists. When an artistic hierarchy flashes certain names repeatedly and implies that ethnic artists will get their chance when they become as good as non-ethnic artists, it is not simply making a misjudgment in evaluation, it is ignoring the fundamental principle of equality. True equality is achievable only through the acknowledgement of the importance of political recognition, and through the implementation of a true cultural democracy. This true cultural democracy must not force cultural minorities to dissociate themselves from their cultural heritages, and must bring them closer to dominant cultures on the basis of an equality which acknowledges new aesthetics that are rooted in, and proceed from, the experiences of diverse cultural communities. ●

Rahul Varma,
Playwright,
Artistic Director,
Teesri Duniya Theatre.

Hebron Dance: L. to R. Anna Fuerstenberg, Harry Standjofski, Howard Rosenstein, Rachelle Glait, Joel Miller.

The project was launched February 20, when members of Teesri Duniya Theatre, in collaboration with the Drama for Human Development program at Concordia University, initiated a series of community outreach meetings. Attendees were asked if they felt the Montreal production and performance of *Hebron* might, in addition to raising general awareness about the complexity of Palestinian and Jewish relationships, be used specifically to promote intercultural and inter-community dialogue between members of the various communities represented in the play and living in Montreal. At this first meeting, individuals from diverse perspectives agreed the project had merit and should be pursued. From here, additional names and resources were suggested, further perspectives were sought out, new participants joined or dropped in to subsequent discussion/information meetings, activities were proposed, and plans for their realization were put in motion. A Steering Team, consisting of representatives from Teesri Duniya Theatre and the Drama for Human Development program and led by community volunteer Tal Ashkenazi, was formed to oversee coordination between the various components of the project.

From its inception, the Community Project was characterized by a generous and articulate sharing of information as close to 50 people took time from busy schedules to attend meetings and share perspectives and resources. The project's central activities—an Exhibit, Sunday Workshop Discussions, a final Public Forum, the distribution of print resources and a follow-up publication—have been undertaken completely through the generous donation of time and effort by team leaders and volunteers. All activities have been guided by the hope that each, in their own way, would contribute particular intellectual and emotional dimensions to the social reflection occasioned by the script and its performance.

The Exhibit

A multi-panel exhibit sought to provide Israeli and Palestinian perspectives on the 1994 Hebron Massacre, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the historical characters represented in the play itself. Coordinated by Hadeel Abdo and Yossi Cadan, the exhibit provided news clippings, photos, timelines, biographic sketches and similar historical data. Space was provided throughout the exhibit for the audience to share comments and responses to any aspect of the production and/or project.

The Workshop Discussion Groups

The project also featured a public Workshop Discussion series following each Sunday's performance. Led by student activist Ilana Ron of McGill University in collaboration with Rachael Berger and Dana Anab, these workshops sought to provide an informal and non-confrontational setting in which audience members could share their views, ask questions, and discuss their intellectual and emotional responses to the play within the context of sometimes diametrically opposed perspectives of others.

The Public Forum

A more formalized public discussion and debate was held at the MAI following the Saturday, May 20 performance. The event was moderated by Teesri's Co-Artist Director, Rahul Varma, and featured speakers Jason Sherman, Palestinian scholar and activist Samia Costandi, and McGill Political Science Professor Sam Noumoff. Transcripts of the speakers' opening remarks and the ensuing public discussion are being prepared for distribution as part the Hebron Project's Publications Team's activities.

The Publications

These final initiatives—led by Eric Abitol of the Quebec Public Interest Research Group (QPIRG) at McGill University, in collaboration with Marisa Zwan, Lauraine Leblanc, Shiri Pasternak, and Krishna Vadrevu—involve the distribution of two publications. The first of these, volume 7 of the peace-building and conflict transformation magazine *Cantilevers*, "Confronting Challenges: Israelis and Palestinians Building Peace," was made available in the lobby for a subsidized cost. The issue, focusing on Israeli-Palestinian relationship-building and social justice issues, seeks to inform readers of the successes and continuing challenges of various initiatives in the region. Chronicling a multi-track approach to peace-building, the publication highlights key facts, provides a guide to regional organizations, and directs readers toward additional resources, including books, periodicals and films. *Cantilevers* is distributed through QPIRG at McGill.

A final follow-up publication, involving the compilation of perspectives pertaining to the collective impact of the play and the various Community Project activities, is underway. This publication will include responses from project participants and other members of the communities represented in the play, the media, the cast, production crew, and audience. This publication is being prepared in collaboration with Teesri Duniya Theatre, *Cantilevers*-peacemedia, and the Drama for Human Development Program. It will be distributed as a supplement to the forthcoming issue of *alt.theatre*, as well as through QPIRG, the Drama for Human Development program and a Web site.

In addition to those mentioned above, the Reading Hebron Community Project could not have been undertaken without the contribution and dedication of additional participants including: Sharon Asher, Stanley Asher, Raphael Bendahan, David Fennario, Anna Fuerstenberg, Dahlia Genusov, Rachelle Glait, Dipti Gupta, Ralph Hage, Salaam Hashmi, Shehzad Hussein, Iffat Kazim, Parag Khare, Puja Khurana, Malek Khouri, Janis Kirshner, Amar Khody, Paul Lefebvre, Gitanjali Lina, Chadi Marouf, Anand Rajaram, Yifat Reuveni, Naushad Siddiqui, Sohail Siddiqui, Daya Varma and Tina Verma. To those who contributed in any way, and whose names are not represented here, our thanks as well. ●

Avoiding The Missionary Position

Ethics, Efficacy, and the Other in a New Undergraduate Theatre Program[i]

by Edward Little

The "Arts in Transition Report," released by the Canadian Conference for the Arts (CCA) in 1997-98, concluded that audiences for the performing arts in Canada 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" (2,3). The report warns that "unless the work of an arts organization is rooted in and meaningful to its community, its survival is precarious" (18). It stresses the need for meaningful participation in art, as distinct from spectatorship alone, and suggests that arts groups and artists must do more to engage with the increasing cultural diversity of the country (30).

Education, training and funding of artists in Canada, however, continue to emphasize modernist traditions that place primary value on the artist as solitary creator—an approach overwhelmingly oriented to the development of artistic skills. As the CCA report points out, this model "has produced and continues to produce many exceptional artists and works of art." At the same time, the report asserts, "many younger artists find it confining, unable to accommodate their desire to work more closely with communities and incorporate social and ecological issues into their art (5,6)".[ii]

Concordia University's new specialization in theatre and development studies is engaging directly with many of the challenges outlined in the CCA report. Launched in September 1998, the Drama for Human Development (DFHD) program focuses on localized populist, celebratory, interventionist and participatory approaches to theatre arts. It is one of five program options in the Theatre Department that lead to a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. All students, regardless of their area of specialization, are required to complete a core group of classes in drama for human development, design, production and performance. The new program places considerable emphasis on the interplay between social, cultural and aesthetic impulses in theatre arts by concentrating on inclusive approaches to theatre arts, many of which are simultaneously interdisciplinary, intergenerational and intercultural in their conceptualization and practice. This approach mirrors what conflict analysis and resolution studies refer to as "multi-tracking" —eschewing any single (or hierarchical) approach and seeking instead to draw together representation, ideas and resources from multiple administrative, professional and grass-roots perspectives.[iii]

Translated into theatrical practice, this involves varying degrees of cultural democracy—a "grass-roots up" approach to cultural production predicated on direct public participation in the production of a living, responsive culture. In theatre and community development projects, this can translate into public collaboration extending to the conception, creation, administration and even performance of the theatrical event.

Cultural democracy defines the opposite end of a continuum from the democratization of culture which involves promoting wider public access to what policy makers like Roy Shaw, a secretary of the British Arts Council during the Thatcher era, commonly refer to as the "high arts." In practice, the democratization of culture is realized through various policies of touring, regional funding, networking and, most important, education. Shaw supports the prevalent view that high art should, by definition, transcend such differences as class by appealing to our common humanity.

As Shaw points out, the sophistication of high art means that, in order to "inherit culture, you must make an effort, sometimes a considerable one," and therefore education must be the "prime factor in facilitating greater access to the arts." Critics such as Owen Kelly counter that an exclusive practice of democratizing culture can also be seen as a system for the "popularization of an already decided cultural agenda"—an agenda and ideology which values consumption of the arts over participation in the arts.

For critics like Shaw, cultural democracy and the democratization of culture can co-exist, but only as separate practices. For Kelly, they must co-exist, because they encompass the central values informing the processes of production and the products of consumption, respectively.[iv] Cultural democracy seeks to reconcile what Alison Beale problematizes as the "antithetical relationship" between culture, defined as "a way or ways of life particular to peoples and nations" and "art," defined as "a set of activities chosen according to elite and traditional values for support and promotion by the state" (356).

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Pedagogy and Practice

In approaching a pedagogy for the practice of cultural democracy, DFHD advocates an approach to theatre arts education and training which is at once alternative and integral to the kind of exclusively modernist approach cited by the CCA and reflected in Shaw's views. Envisioning cultural democracy and the democratization of culture as interdependent and complementary, the program explores a modest Kama Sutra of alternatives to the commonly proscribed missionary position in which amateur and professional or popular/mainstream approaches are seen as competing and mutually exclusive.

Stressing the interconnectivity of the program's two trajectories—personal and social development—the specialization seeks to better prepare prospective theatre artists, animators, facilitators, scholars, etc. to participate in a wider range of social, cultural, intercultural and aesthetic contexts. Training and education in this direction requires that each student undertake a frank and candid assessment of the ideas, beliefs and biases informing their personal relationship to art, to activism, and to the artist's role and impact as cultural worker. Active learning techniques adapted from communication studies and therapeutic applications of theatre appear to be particularly effective in this regard, however therapeutic techniques in particular can be emotionally invasive. Similar risks exist in theatre and development projects. Using theatre to express the hopes, dreams, fears, anger and everyday realities of particular communities often proceeds from the use of local and personal stories

which may involve instances of trauma. While public testimony and witnessing[v] of this kind can be particularly effective in enabling students and community participants to address personal fears, marginalization, disempowerment, xenophobia and the like, it also can, at its most potent, effect a degree of re-traumatization if not adequately contained and debriefed. In the classroom (as in the community), factors such as rigid timetables make it imperative that adequate time and resources for support and debriefing be built into course (or project) planning.

Artists in Community

To prepare students for this kind of training and work, the program's "Artists in Community" foundation course introduces students to therapeutic and developmental aspects of theatre and drama as they relate to personal and group development. While an upper-level course in Drama Therapy concentrates more intensively on the impact and therapeutic implications of participatory theatre for individuals, the introductory course emphasizes development in personal, social, and political awareness and critical thinking skills. Theoretical and literary readings exploring various perspectives on the role and function of the artist in community are combined with introductory exercises that explore the impact of factors, such as body language, status relationships, archetypes and stereotypes in interpersonal and intercultural communication. Para-theatrical activities, such as public gatherings, ceremonies, rites and rituals, are examined to determine ways in which narrative structure and conventions of behavior, as well as social, cultural and other factors, contribute to the construction and communication of meaning and the status quo.

Therapeutic techniques adapted from Augusto Boal's "Cop in the Head" work are used to address internalized fear, resistance, inhibition and bias manifested in the creative expression of each student. Work in this area seeks to expand personal awareness, strengthen verbal and non-verbal forms of communication, and clarify distinctions between objective and subjective observation. Working with techniques adapted from Image Theatre, Rainbow of Desire, and Forum Theatre, students create multiple images/perspectives that are then discussed as a means of enriching each individual's understanding of themselves, of others, and of the group per se. This process—which Boal describes as "analogical induction," advocates identification as the optimal participatory position. To explore broader levels of identification with the Other, we also adapted the kind of group Role Drama activities developed by Carole Tarlington and Patrick Verrior to encourage students to explore empathy with positions which were most removed from their own.

In exploring interpersonal communication, we adapted exercises from Joseph Schaeffer's work in intercultural communication. Schaeffer believes the immediate concern is not to "understand each other, but rather to continue to not understand each other together." His approach centres on identifying "differences that matter, and those that don't." Schaeffer's work promotes the development of "deep listening, open communication, and genuine interest," all essential skills for theatre facilitators, animators and artists involved in intercultural and multidisciplinary approaches to creating theatre.

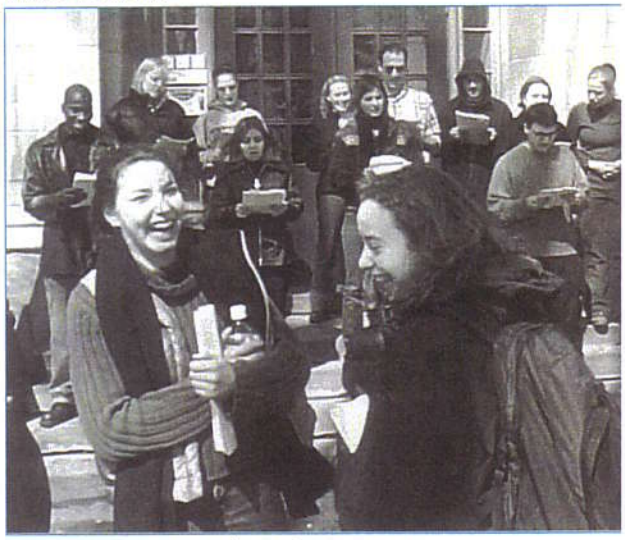
As further preparation for an ongoing collaborative process of creating art from personal and group experience, we looked at practical and ethical concerns surrounding the use of local stories involving individuals who are, or may be, participants or witnesses to the public staging and interpretation of their stories. Particular stress was placed on the implications of performing reductive or simplistic political analyses that tend toward what Julie Salverson refers to as a hegemonic "triad of victims, oppressors and helpers" (36). As Salverson points out, in attempting to respect the integrity of local stories, idealizing authenticity at the expense of aesthetics or theatrical form often results in naturalistic sketches which emphasize "personal stories of victimization at the hands of a superficially explored oppressor." Whether working in provocative, communicative, or celebratory forms, students are cautioned to be wary of "the lie of the literal," and to respect the communicative potential of art, its resonant power of abstraction and its ability to engage contradictory material without imposing resolution or closure.

Issues of testimony and witnessing are taken up in greater depth in an upper-level course examining issues such as ethical concerns and social implications of creating new stories and the discovery and use of local stories, legends, personal testimony and the like. Considerations include the purposes and social relevance of oral traditions, the roles of storytelling in an age of globalization, the meaning of orality in a literate society, and the potential for re-discovery of oral practices within contemporary contexts.[vi]

The Audience and the Performance Event

The program's second foundation course examines theatre and development from a more directly theatrical social perspective. Students study the implications of various configurations of the relationship between the audience and the performance event in representative projects from genres and forms including agitprop, the Canadian Workers' Theatre Movement, the Theatre Workshop models of Joan Littlewood and George Luscombe, collectively created documentary drama, the American avant garde, contemporary issue-based Popular theatre, and the large-scale Collaborative Community Play (arguably the most comprehensive large-scale approach to culturally democratic theatre practice in Canada today). Focusing on the interplay between social, political, cultural and aesthetic factors, students consider the efficacy of various organizational and theoretical models, and the way in which such models are translated into practice. Key concepts involve the degree and nature of cultural democracy, aesthetic impact, local engagement and the interplay of affirmation and intervention in the determination of the status quo. Students gain direct experience of specific techniques through designing and implementing workshops and a final collaboratively built presentation.

Upper-level courses concentrate more directly on developing the prerequisite skill sets for individualized graduating projects involving internships and community placements. A course in theatre with young people provides an important component of intergenerational work, while a course in the theory and practice of popular theatre examines prominent models and applications of the work in Canada and abroad. Boal's work figures prominently, as does that of selected practitioners and companies from the Caribbean, South and Central America, Southern Africa, Europe and the U.S.[vii]



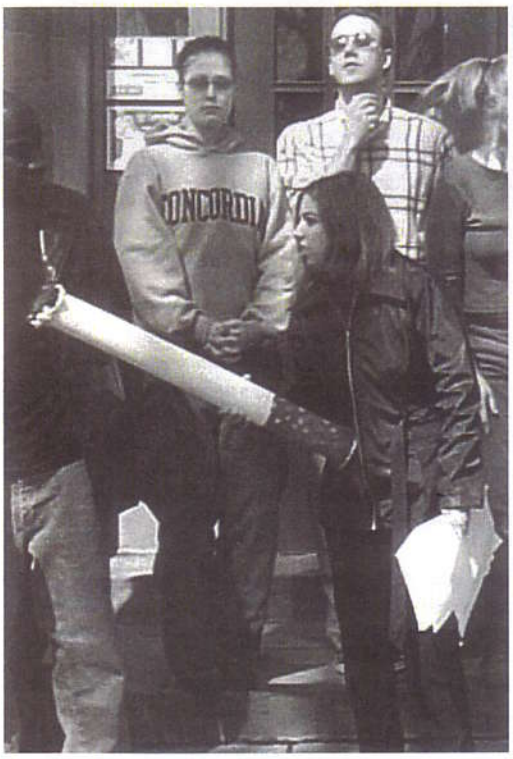
The prerequisite course for graduating projects provides hands-on experience in the design, development, and implementation of theatre activities and projects for individuals with specific needs in schools, community groups, institutional settings and the like. The course puts a particular emphasis on art's ability to communicate identity and difference, struggle and empowerment. Topics include specialized teaching strategies, activity planning, group needs assessment, classroom or workshop management and self-evaluation.[viii]

Active Learning

All classes stress the development of interpersonal and group leadership skills through active learning. As a complement to research, studio-based classes allow students to practice skills and techniques with each other to incorporate as much direct experience of the work as possible, in terms of personal impact and how their work affects other individuals and the group as a whole. The program's pedagogical stance reflects that of Paulo Freire, who insisted that effective popular education is predicated on epistemological dialogue between teachers and students. For their part, students are charged to be students/teachers; self-disciplined, self-actualizing and responsible for contributing to an optimum balance between their own personal development and the learning and growth of the group as a whole. Instructors and students must all take responsibility for nurturing a group dynamic supportive of emotional and creative risk and respectful of difference. As in the work of Boal, the classroom—in effect functioning as popular

Previous Page, Above and Below: DFHD students rehearsing a public intervention on the steps of the theatre building.

Culturally democratic approaches to theatre arts are generating interest from Art Councils and organizations across Canada.



Edward Little teaches in the theatre department at Concordia University, where he has been coordinating the new specialization in Drama for Human Development. He is a freelance director specializing in large-scale community projects. Over the past few years, he has been increasingly occupied as a director/consultant on a variety of projects exploring intercultural, participatory, and culturally democratic approaches to theatre and community development in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and British Columbia.

theatre—becomes a space where the potential strengths and liabilities of strategies for change are explored and rehearsed. For their part, the teachers/students are charged with delivering the agreed-upon curriculum while remaining responsive to the potential contribution of each student's experience and insight, especially in areas relating to the development and communication of individualized learning.

Practicing, Not Preaching

Culturally democratic approaches to theatre arts are generating interest from Art Councils and organizations across Canada. These include the B.C. Assembly of Arts Councils, the Manitoba Arts Council, Saskatchewan's Common Weal Community Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Annapolis Royal Community Arts Council. The CCA strongly advocates this approach in their 1999 "Artists and Communities" paper, and the Canada Council has recently funded a number of projects of this sort through "Artists in Communities" pilot initiatives.[ix]

Concordia's specialization in Drama for Human Development seeks to engage with a more multi-disciplinary, multicultural and multi-track approach to creating and critiquing theatre arts. The program promotes a vision of theatre artists as cultural workers; artists specialized in representation, socially informed and proficient in various approaches to social, interpersonal and intercultural communication. While so-called popular and mainstream approaches to theatre and cultural production often are seen as competing and mutually exclusive, DFHD—situated within a theatre department offering co-requisite courses in more traditional approaches to performance, design and production—insists that they be recognized as symbiotic and complementary parts of a vigorous and inclusive vision of theatre. The aim is to promote greater access and relevance in theatre arts, to encourage more populist participation in social dialogue, and to avoid proselytizing any socially and culturally specific "missionary positions" which might prescribe and limit the role of spectators, artists, participants or witnesses engaged in the theatrical act.

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Notes

[i] This paper was delivered to the Association for Canadian Theatre Research at the May 2000 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities held in Edmonton, AB.

[ii] The Arts in Transition Project was funded by The Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation and The Department of Canadian Heritage. It was compiled after consultation with federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal cultural departments and arts councils, and close to 200 Canadian artists and arts professionals.

[iii] See, for example, Cantilevers Vol. 7 "Confronting Challenges: Israelis and Palestinians Building Peace."

[iv] See *alt.theatre* Vol. 1, No 3 pp 8-10. See also Webster's World of Cultural Democracy at www.wwcd.org/index.html. The debate between Kelly and Shaw is succinctly encapsulated in Kershaw.

[v] For discussions of witnessing and testimony, see Salverson, and Maree.

[vi] This description is taken largely from Rachael Van Fossen's 1999-2000 syllabus for the course "Stories and Storytelling." Full information about the Drama for Human Development Program is available at http://theatre.concordia.ca.

[vii] This description is taken largely from Andrew Wilmer's 1999-2000 syllabus for the course.

[viii] This description is taken largely from Rachael Van Fossen's 1999-2000 syllabus for the course. During the Winter 2000 semester, the class developed outreach activities with students with special learning needs from a local private school.

[ix] The Laidlaw Foundation's recently released report on these initiative was not availible in time to include its findings here. ●

Introducing Hatterr

A Response by Soraya Peerbaye

***Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!* Adapted by Rehan Ansari; directed by Saniya Ansari and Rehan Ansari; featuring Sean Hakim, Marvin Ishmael and Paul Lee; set design by Darren O'Donnell. Presented by Modest Productions, January 27 to February 13, at Theatre Passe Muraille, Toronto.**

With *Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!*, Modest Productions invites the beguiling character of H. Hatterr from the dusty corridors of literature and onto the stage. The hero of the 1948 G.V. Desani novel, *All About H. Hatterr*, Hatterr wants desperately to play the part of the proper Englishman, but is ultimately undone by his desire to be genuine before us and to himself. As a reluctant actor seeking authenticity, Hatterr is an engaging theatrical archetype.

Directed by the sibling team of Saniya and Rehan Ansari, the adaptation by Rehan Ansari narrates one episode of Hatterr's many adventures. The half Asian, half European orphan, played by Paul Lee, cons his way into an upper-class British club despite his colour, only to be expelled following an incident involving his sweepress. Looking for the affirmation of his own kind, he turns to an Indian sage, and finds himself prey to a more unscrupulous con man than himself. Unfortunately, script and staging lack the theatrical tautness that would animate the story. That said, it's clear that *Damme* merits a second draft, as the play's contradictory characters offer a send-up and celebration of biculturalism.

Desani's characters speak what Hatterr apologetically calls "rigmarole English," a pidgin concocted from Shakespearean eloquence and common indignation which Saiman Rushdie cites as an influence. The result is a brilliant, hilarious language, rich in poetic metaphors, street expletives and cultural references. Modest Productions reveals its potential as theatrical verse, reminding us that this is more than a literary style but also a spoken language—begged, borrowed and stolen by the likes of *Damme's* roguish characters.

The Ansaris slow down Hatterr's verbose ruminations, allowing us to weave our way through the complex word play. But while the pace, and Lee's sympathetic performance, convey Hatterr's reflectiveness as he speaks, they also anticipate where his words will take him; a sense that Hatterr humbles into discovery through his soliloquies is missing. As Hatterr's outrageous friend Bannerji, master of malapropisms Marvin Ishmael is more successful. "You are swapping horses mid-ship," he chides Hatterr at one point. Other times, he closes a discussion with an authoritative "It's Latin," and leaves it as that, or trails off as he quotes the Bible, like a Beatles fan who only remembers the chorus but devotedly sings "la-la-la" for the rest of the song. While Hatterr seems to pursue meaning through his verse, Bannerji is the master obfuscator. At present, directors and actors learn the language's magic when playing with banter, when the characters seem startled by what emerges from their mouths, and we watch their reactions as the penny drops, or falls, through the gutter. Directors and actors, though, must explore further the rhythm of thought in this verse, particularly in Hatterr's soliloquies. In that sense, it is no different from Shakespeare, "faux" notwithstanding.

Marvin Ishmael(left) and Paul Lee in a scene from *Damme, This is the Oriental Scene for You!*

A Tough Nut To Crack

The character of Hatterr himself is a tough nut to crack. On a purely comedic level, he is related to another literary character, P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. A careless upper-class chap, blithely ignorant of the havoc he creates, Wooster is vaguely contemptible yet still mostly likeable. Similarly, Hatterr is an unlikely hero, blind to his own brand of racism as he dismisses his Malay mother, the classism in the way he insults the sweepress, or the sexism inherent in both cases. In a more subtle way, he is related to Hamlet, hesitant to act, resistant to his own insight. The trick, then, is to signal to us when realization dawns on Hatterr, and when he remains oblivious.

If we miss these signals, it's in part because the production never clarifies the nature of the relationship between Hatterr and his audience. In many respects, *Damme* feels like a one-man show: Hatterr acts as our narrator, clearly addressing us, while other characters enter and exit at his convenience, unaware of our presence. Like many one-person plays, *Damme* makes us, the audience, ask; Who are we? What is our role? How do we affect, and even alter, the performance? "If I am in your way," says Hatterr to us as the play opens, "in your street, in this Earth of majesty, this other Eden, this England and if, by the Bard o' Avon, I desire you to do me right and justice...it is because, by the Lord God of hosts, the Holy, who made you of the happy breed and me of the stricken, I am lonely!" The confession is disarming in its simplicity. But as the play progresses and Hatterr seems often to forget us, the premise is undone.

So, by the time Hatterr's confrontation with the Sage (played with sly physical grace by Sean Hakim) leaves him disillusioned, we're not sure if we've caught him, figuratively as well as literally, with his pants down. Ultimately, this is why the play does not yet succeed. Without Hatterr or the audience knowing the rules of the game, we cannot know if his performance is going as planned, when he lies, when he tells the truth or when he is vulnerable before us. When, at the very end, he catches a glimmer of understanding of who he is in a quiet, understated moment, we cannot know if this is the conclusion at which he had always known he would arrive or a revelation. The connection with the audience, which could therefore be our resolution as well as Hatterr's, eludes us.

One hopes nonetheless that Saniya and Rehan Ansari will re-examine their script and staging and fulfill its promise. Despite its flaws, *Damme* introduces us to an original character and language, and is one of the more provocative and reflective explorations of the legacy of colonialism to emerge, touching in its absence of cynicism and in its sweetness. ●

It Takes One To Know One

Puente Theatre Examines Shared Immigrant Experience, Confronts Stereotypical Perceptions.

by Lina de Guevara

PUENTE Theatre, based in Victoria, British Columbia, has been in existence since 1988. Its mandate is to explore, through theatre, the experiences of immigrants to Canada. PUENTE started as a way to fill a personal need I felt as an immigrant. I wanted to explain myself, and my culture, to the rest of society. Because I was a theatre person in Chile, my country of birth, it was natural for me to use theatre as a means of this expression. I searched for, and found, other women from Latin America who felt this desire to express themselves and their experiences. Together, we created the first PUENTE play, which we called *I wasn't born here: Stories of Latin American immigrant women.*

That first project, which was supported by a Job Development grant from Manpower and Immigration Canada, played a key role in establishing the roots of PUENTE. The six months we had to work on the play offered a unique opportunity, allowing us enough time to train actors who didn't speak English and who, in most cases, didn't have performance backgrounds. We also had time to do extensive research in the community, and to develop a methodology for our rehearsals and for the creation of our script. Since the completion of that first play, these tools have continued to evolve. Every new play requires its own approach, but it was the long time we were able to dedicate to that first project that became so fruitful afterwards.

Crossing Borders, *Canadian Tango* and *Familya* all were plays dealing with the effects of immigration on the lives of Latin Americans. Almost everybody who participated in these plays was from there. In 1996,we expanded to include performers from other cultures. We found then that the common experiences of immigration provided a strong link between all of us. *Of Roots and Racism*, *Sisters/Strangers*, *Act Now Against racism*, *Story Mosaic* and *Story Telling Our Lives* are expressions of this phase in PUENTE's life.

We have explored several topics in our struggle to express the shared experiences of our common immigrant communities. In researching the social realities of our community (immigrants from Latin America), we have examined and discovered the difference between the experiences of men and women. Many men had arrived here alone, as refugees, escaping wars in which they had been forced to take part, either as rebels or as soldiers. Women more commonly arrived as part of a family group, with husbands and children. As a general rule, men were out in the workforce while women remained isolated at home. But there also were many examples of role reversals. Women as wage earners, men doing housework, and children taking on the roles of parenthood, speaking for their parents and becoming their link with the new environment. Nostalgia was an emotion shared by all, and it could become paralyzing and overwhelming. The relationships with the family back in the homeland were very complex. Guilt is another feeling that many immigrants share. Losing one's profession, changes in status, feeling misunderstood, diminished and discriminated against are some of the negative emotions we all experience. A sense of power in overcoming difficulties, the excitement of living an adventure, the broadening of horizons and the freedom provided by breaking loose from strict traditions are some of the positive aspects of being an immigrant we have experienced.

All this has become the emotional background of our plays, but we've still had to find the theatrical expressions. These include the stories, the images, the movement, the music; all the ways of relating to the audience that the subject of immigration meant to us. As a director and writer, I often have the feeling that our plays create themselves out of the reality we're exploring, out of the demands of theatricality, and out of the restraints imposed upon us by our immigrant condition. For example, we don't have a total

command of the English language, which leaves the questions of what stories we can tell and how we are going to tell them without language.

Representing the Other by Representing Ourselves

The theme of "representation of the other" awakens interesting thoughts in me. Until now, I have never been concerned with it, because I've never felt we were representing the "other." I've felt I was representing our own reality. I think this feeling comes from how strongly the experience of immigration acts as a uniting factor. Despite differences in race, religion, culture, and even gender, all immigrants have lived through similar moments. For example, waking up one morning and asking ourselves: "What have I done? What am I doing here?" On the other hand, I've often been bothered by the way "my" reality has been pictured by the mainstream. I seldom feel happy with the way Latin Americans are portrayed, and cultural appropriation offends me when I see it happening in a superficial and uninformed way. I have no strict rules about this. I support and applaud every effort made to really comprehend another culture and another community. I have had the experience of having a "foreigner" come and teach me to appreciate aspects of my own culture that I was ignorantly dismissing.

I believe much racism and discrimination comes from the fact that our cultures are known to the mainstream through our problems and not through our successes. Latin Americans are seen as coming from a needy continent, full of military dictators, where people dance, sing and are colourful but have no idea how to solve their own political and social problems. A more in-depth analysis of our history, culture and economy, and more respect for our achievements in education, science, the arts and traditional social structures, is facing. I believe knowledge about the achievements of other cultures is essential to the elimination of racism.

What can be done about it? We have our own field of action: the theatre. PUENTE (in collaboration with the Belfry Theatre and Full Spectrum Productions) is into its Third Play Reading series, featuring plays written in the countries from which many immigrants come. These include Chile, Ghana, Portugal, Nigeria, Japan, Lithuania, Jamaica and South Africa. We have found some admirable scripts that have provided us with exciting insights. I definitely do not believe the only theatre worth knowing is produced on Broadway. We also do readings of poetry from around the world, in English and in the original languages. We do workshop translations, mostly from Spanish into English. In our interactive theatre presentations in community centres, high-schools and other educational institutions, we always acknowledge the source of our methods, the work of Latin American theoreticians, such as Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire.

Aside from our own scripts, we would like to produce more plays by non-English authors. We have staged *The House of Bernarda Alba*, by F. Garcia Lorca, and *Evita and Victoria*, by Monica Ottino. These are excellent plays, the former from Spain and the latter from Argentina. For a small organization like ours, these ventures are risky and complicated, so we must go slowly.

We are committed to supporting and mentoring theatre people who are recent immigrants and live in Victoria. They need guidance about the Canadian Theatre scene, help when dealing with granting agencies and, most of all, they need to feel hope that it is possible for them to continue practicing their art here.

Our work during these eleven years has been very interesting, and it has led to many reflections and discoveries about theatre, immigration, culture and community. It is wonderful to have an avenue such as *alt.theatre* in which to open discussions and exchange ideas with others embarked on similar adventures. ●

I believe much racism and discrimination comes from the fact that our cultures are known to the mainstream through our problems and not through our successes.

Lina de Guevera is Artistic Director of PUENTE Theatre in Victoria, B.C.

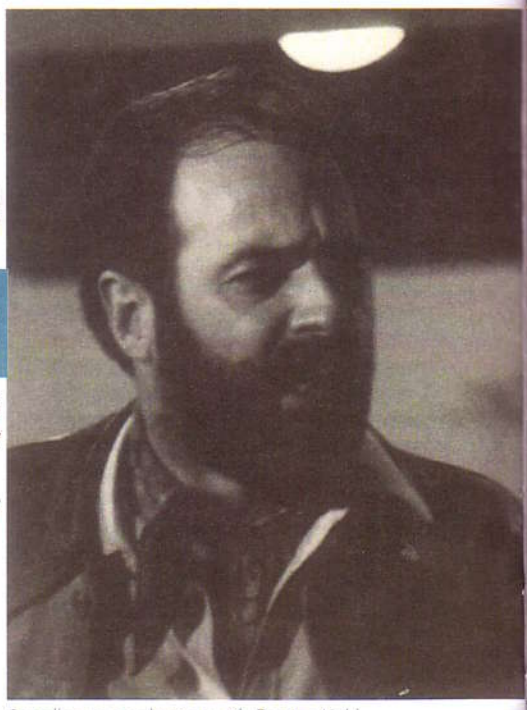
In December 1999, the seventh Mexican, and first Hispano-American, Pastorela Festival took place in Mexico City. Pastorelas have their origins in the medieval mystery plays, and tell of the struggle between Good and Evil for the possession of the souls of humans. They have become an instrument for communities to express issues and concerns, and the Festivals, to date celebrated annually in different localities in Mexico, are hugely popular celebrations. PUENTE Theatre was invited to participate with its Play, *Pastorela de Juan Tierra el Immigrante.*

In December 2000, the eighth Mexican, and second Hispano-American, Pastorela Festival will take place in Tepic in the Mexican province of Nayarit.

From September 20 to 25 this year, PUENTE's artistic director, Lina de Guevara, will take part in a Hispano-American Pastorela Workshop, to be held on Mexcaltitlan Island in Nayarit. Bringing together theatre directors and writers from Argentina, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, the U.S. and Mexico, the workshop will explore how different communities and cultures interpret this ancient theatre form, and what developments these Festivals can have in the future.

For more information about these events, visit www.proyectointegrarte.com and look under the FESTHIP section.

In The Face Of The Status Quo



Smedley in production with Dorian Kohl.

George Ryga Originated Theatre as an Unofficial but Important Opposition Party

by Ken Smedley

George Ryga, a founding father of Canadian literature, theatre and culture, was derived from the "other." In fact, he converted the other—his experience growing up in a marginalized Ukranian community in the Athabasca of northern Alberta—into the first Canadian literature to depict the realities of the rural immigrant community in Canada. These realities are embodied in his early novels, *Hungry Hills* and *Ballad of a Stonepicker*. *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, Ryga's most renowned work, brought the disaffected others of Canadian society into the mainstream consciousness, legitimizing professional Canadian theatre in the process. As a result, Ryga became a major spokesperson for the disenfranchised of the society, raising an aspect of social-humanitarian awareness that contributed to the evolving notions of Canadian identity. When people experienced *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, they were affected by the immediacy of theatre's power, and the impact of this literally moved them to a place of humanness that had to be acted upon. It has been said that great writers are like another government, and Ryga and his work were a definite party in opposition to the status quo.

Ken Smedley, Artistic Director, George Ryga Centre.

What was it that gave Ryga such an insight into the plight of the others—the disadvantaged, disempowered and marginalized? Basically, his people had been sent to the cold, barren Athabasca, with a growing season of fifty days, because their skin was swarthier than that of other immigrants. In his own words, he lived closer to feudalism than the lights of Edmonton, 120 miles away. His closest counterparts in this condition were the native peoples.

He evolved from this margin to become a Canadian artist in the 1950s. As a male, this was to go way beyond, and to fly in the face of, the status quo. It was to defy all established expectations and traditions; it was akin to treason. The ultimate achievement of such a radical choice was to creatively transform into the significant other. In the process, Ryga realized the power of such a choice, and had the intuitive sense to exercise the voice of that experience, infusing it with a tone and resonance that was undeniably real in its representation of those other perspectives on the landscape and, consequently, in its challenge to the entrenched value system. For a time, Ryga was regarded with an uneasy respect.

Grass and Wild Strawberries created another radical departure: it attracted young people to the theatre in unprecedented numbers. This was truly a volatile mix, and was highly disturbing to the status quo. Young people were beginning to form their own theatrical cadres across the country and, to some extent, emulate elements of this theatrical style, expressing themselves in radically new ways and dramatically demonstrating their discontentment and unrest. This theatre of socio-political issues and humanitarian concerns was a hot potato, putting a lot of people on the hot seat. Whole communities were alive with ideas, originality, creativity, heated debate—and even confrontation. The flip side of the cool, calm, collected colonialist culture had been inflamed. This theatre had the capacity to unleash a dangerous force. It was different from the usual imported fare, in that it didn't attract the accustomed elite, but people from all walks of life. None of this went unnoticed.

Political Unrest Breeds Censorship

In the late spring of 1970, the Vancouver Playhouse commissioned Ryga to write a play about urban violence. In October of the same year, the FLQ Crisis in Quebec precipitated Pierre Trudeau's implementation of the War Measures Act, and the entire country was placed under Marshal Law. This event became the subject matter for Ryga's most compellingly political play, *Captives of the Faceless Drummer*. As a result, the CEOs on the Vancouver Playhouse's Board of Directors imposed their own Marshal Law against this play, censoring it out of the production season. Their replacement choice was an import, none other than Neil Simon's *Plaza Suite*. Because Ryga protested, his theatre was discredited and his voice was excised from the scene as effectively as various totalitarian regimes silenced the Havels, Mrozeks and Hays. So effective was the discreditation in the aftermath of the *Captives* controversy that Ryga did not receive a mainstage production on the government-funded regional theatre system, which *Rita Joe* legitimized, for 17 years.

In essence, Canadian theatre was effectively simonized into a format of television emulation, which has more in common with sitcom than with theatre, and Ryga's theatre of ideas, issues and social-humanitarian concerns was polished off the

stage. Ironically, what was done to the work was similar to what was done to *Rita Joe*; it was disenfranchised from the culture. Paradoxically, all the issues the work addressed continue to bite at our heels today, threatening to unravel what little fabric remains in the knit that holds us together.

Ultimately, what's important to recollect is that Ryga's theatre—his unique dramatic voice and style—came off a landscape that reflected the lives and issues of all Canadians. The politic and premise of his work is based in a credo he learned as a child: "I believe we are all brothers and sisters. If one of us hurts, no matter where in this world, we must all feel the pain."

Keeping Ryga's Torch Lit

It's time to re-evaluate the theatre of Ryga, just as we've been re-evaluating our values vis-a-vis the forces of globalization and technology and their dehumanizing effect, which inevitably impacts our sense of identity. It's imperative that we do so before we become any further detached from who we are, who we might have been and who we might still be, in exchange for becoming further co-opted by the faceless drummers and relegated to the no-man's land of the virtual insignificant other.

With hope, a new generation of theatre practitioners will re-evaluate the power of the theatre as other government, and as another opposition party to the party with power. Bearing in mind, heart and soul that the objective is not to attain power but to resist it and, in opposition, to hold an immediate mirror up to the nature of the beast, this new generation can make that beast accountable, thereby restoring some balance and functionality to an increasingly dysfunctional condition. This must be done regardless of the potential for embarrassing or offending the Emperor—without his clothes—and his public. In truth, what could be more entertaining?

There still is hope if a new generation takes back the theatre with the fire in its belly that was simonized away...takes back that "other" theatre that was never fully realized, and affects another revolution on the theatrical wheel. ●

Ken Smedley:

A Part of Ryga's Past, A Piece of Ryga's Future

Ken Smedley began his work as a founding member of The Western Canada Youth Theatre in Kamloops, B.C. in the mid- through late 1960s. The company produced Smedley's first full length play, *Renegades*, in 1970. The production toured western Canada as a seminal work from a young company that would go on, with Smedley's continued involvement, to become the Western Canada Theatre Co. The creation of this original work, one of the first to transform B.C. history and heritage into theatre, came on the heels of Smedley's early association with George Ryga in the late 1960s.

During the course of his apprenticeship in English repertory theatre, as an acting stage manager and producer of Lunchtime/LateNight Theatre at the Phoenix Theatre in Leicester, England, Smedley was introduced to Scottish actor Alec McCrindle. McCrindle, a co-producer of the Edinburgh Fringe, extended an invitation to the Western Canada Youth Theatre to perform at the prestigious festival. In 1973, the company presented Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which earned Ryga an international Fringe First Award.

In the mid-1970s, an intensification of Smedley's working relationship with Ryga, Newfoundland playwright Michael Cook and actor David Ross created The Giant's Head Theatre Co. and the program "East of Ryga, West of Cook." Based in Ryga and Cook's most seminal work, the program toured western and eastern Canada and then, with the addition of Cook's *Teresa's Creed*, went on to tour the U.K. with Newfoundland's Rising Tide Theatre, concluding with a limited run at the New Arts Theatre in London.

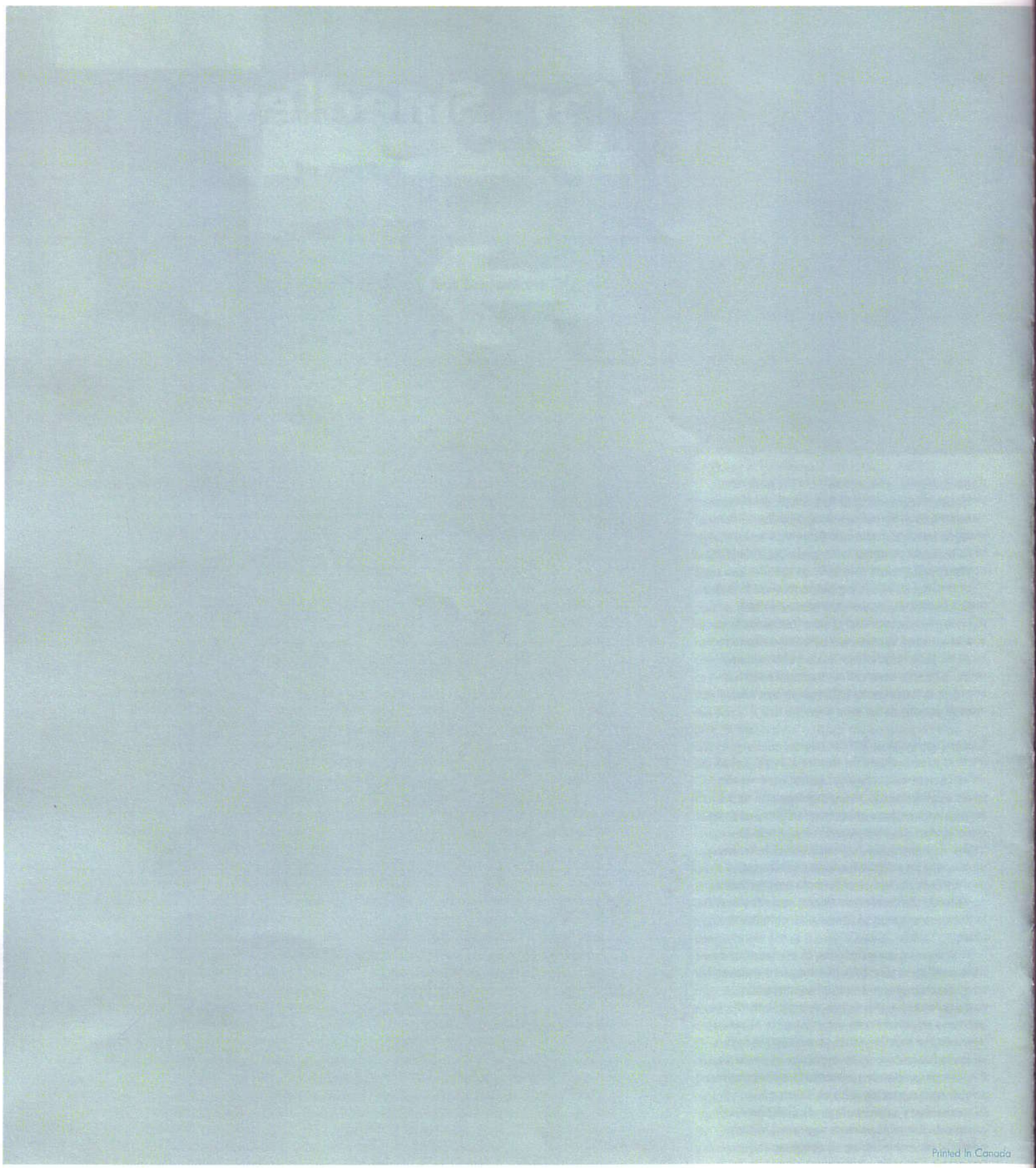
Through the latter half of the 1970s, until Ryga's untimely death in the late 1980s, Smedley spent a significant portion of the year writing and producing new work (initially from Ryga's small casa) in Ajijic, Mexico, where it premiered to an international expatriate audience prior to its performance on the emerging Fringe Festival circuit in Canada. One such production was an adaptation of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, entitled *Portrait of a Lady-A Tribute to Margaret Laurence*, with dramaturgy by Cook and performed by Dorian Kohl, who has continued to perform the work for over 20 years. This past summer, Kohl's tribute was once again acclaimed at the Winnipeg International Fringe Festival.

In January 1988, in collaboration with Edmonton Fringe founder Brian Paisley, Smedley produced "El Fringe," the first Fringe festival in Latin America. Ryga died of stomach cancer on November 18, 1987, at the age of 55, at his home in Summerland, B.C. "El Fringe" was dedicated to Ryga, who once lived and wrote in the village of San Antonio, just down the road from Ajijic on the shores of Lake Chapala. It was at "El Fringe" that Smedley first performed his one-man tribute to Ryga, then titled *A Ringside Date With An Angel*. This tribute opened Playwrights Montreal's 1989 National Ryga Retrospective at the National Theatre School in Montreal. Annually, during the past decade, Smedley has continued to produce a commemorative to Ryga which features aspects of Ryga's life and work.

In February 1996, The George Ryga Centre Society, a non-profit/charitable organization independent of government funding, fundraised the down-payment on Ryga's former home in Summerland, B.C., where *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, along with the majority of Ryga's vast body of work, was created. Since that time, The George Ryga Centre has functioned as a cultural center/retreat in memory of Ryga's enormous contribution to Canadian culture.

With a monthly mortgage to pay, the Centre, under Smedley's direction, is an active organization which has produced a national authors' series, hosting such writers as Sandra Birdsell, Mark Leiren-Young, Cynthia Flood and Sean Virgo, to name a few. It also has hosted annual Songwriter's Workshops, performances with Bill Henderson and Roy Forbes, a season of theatrical presentations including John Huston in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, The English Suitcase Theatre and Collected Works Theatre's summer Shakespeare retreat. This year's commemorative, the 12th annual, will feature The Campbell Ryga Jazz Trio, with Campbell playing tribute to his father, throughout the Okanagan-interior of B.C.

At the end of the day, after attending to the needs of the Centre, Smedley continues to write on an old Underwood. His latest play is entitled *The Erotic Exchange*. ●



Printed in Canada

Le Conseil des Arts du Canada | The Canada Council for the Arts

Ville de Montréal

CONSEIL DES ARTS ET DES LETTRES DU QUÉBEC

CONSEIL DES ARTS COMMUNAUTÉ URBAINE DE MONTRÉAL

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested $16.9 million in theatre throughout Canada.