Eleanor Foulkes
Alberto Guevara
Martha Herrera-Lasso
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DISPATCH
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reflects on the work of Paris's popular theatre troupe, Théâtre de l'opprimé.

BOOK REVIEW
AUDREY KOBAYASHI
reviews *Asian Canadian Theatre: New Essays on Canadian Theatre*

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"Change the World, One Play at a Time"

COVER PHOTO
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Cara Gee and Pamela Sinha in Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* at Factory Theatre, November 5 – December 11, 2011, directed by Ken Gass.

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ARTICLES

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DISPATCH

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BOOK REVIEW

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alt.ercations: *alt.theatre*'s Uphill Climb

BY NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

alt.ruisums | *Good intentions*

I always suspected that the fight for social equality for marginalized groups and the transformative power of the arts were somehow linked. However, even as an idealistic adolescent this seemed dubious: everything I witnessed about real-world productivity seemed to involve a division of labour conducive neither to social justice activism nor creative expression, let alone a conscious union of the two. However, the combination of opportunity and audacity led me to experiment with things like anti-racist organizing and acting classes.

Some years ago, I finished my undergraduate degree and found myself moving around the country with dreams of saving the world through theatre. After shuffling from Montreal to Victoria, I encountered director and facilitator Lina de Guevara. I picked her brain about her work and methodology: *How do you sustain a culturally diverse theatre company in a small city like Victoria? Are there other companies like yours? How do you sustain community-based theatre work anywhere? How do you devise an original show when there are barely enough resources to rehearse a pre-written script? How do immigrant artists establish themselves in the Canadian theatre? How can we invest ourselves in marginalized theatre practices when theatre itself is so often marginalized by the rest of society?*

At one point she kindly handed me a stack of *alt.theatre* back issues. I had come across *alt.theatre* once or twice during my four years at McGill University (home to *alt*'s associate editor, Denis Salter, whom I did not know at the time), but for whatever reason I had not taken the time to explore it closely. As I flipped through the stack, it opened my eyes to the legacy of discourse and practice that I had been looking for. *alt.theatre* introduced me to the work of innovative artists in different pockets of Canada and abroad, and articulated issues that I felt but had not been able to put into words. Reading *alt* empowered me as an emerging artist to experiment, collaborate, push the envelope, strive for artistic excellence, resist the urge to self-censor, and put myself into my practice. A few pieces in particular have leapt out at me throughout *alt*'s life so far, such as Rahul Varma's guest editorial in issue 6.3, "When Politics Gets Personal", in which he describes how deliberately conflating the personal and the political in art creates anxiety in socially privileged audience members, and Monique Mojica's inspiring "Stories from the Body, Blood Memory and Organic Texts" in issue 4.2.

Perhaps what the discovery of *alt* most offered me was that "alternative" forms of theatre can actually probe society. Not just through community-based and socially intervening projects—although those, to be sure, bear wonderful fruits and open important conversations—but through the very performance of "difference," whatever that may be. When performance space is taken up by diverse bodies and voices, the ensuing theatre has the power to change the popular imagination's conceptions of what is "normal," "good," "interesting." Dr. Catherine Frazee summarized this belief most succinctly in September of this year when speaking at Prismatic (a national, biennial festival dedicated to culturally diverse and Aboriginal arts): "We can work until we drop in the courts and through policy work, but we get nowhere until we've had an impact on culture. Everything we know about justice and being human, that's where all those things happen."

alt.ernatives | Why *alt.theatre?*

As I take the reins of "Canada's only journal dedicated to the intersection of politics, cultural diversity, social activism and the stage," even my longstanding enthusiasm for *alt.theatre* can't stop me from asking myself what relevance the-little-theatre-journal-that-could holds today.

In his editorial for *alt.theatre* 6.4 in June 2009, Edward Little opened a related discussion with the query: *Are we there yet?* He described the uphill battle *alt.theatre* faces when it "question[s] prevailing ideologies; resist[s] pressures to link the arts to the commercial values of the market place; counterbalance[s] the individualistic profit motives of corporate forces; and nurture[s] a healthy, pluralistic democracy operating in the interests of a culturally inclusive 'common good.'" In the face of national media's Goliath—"largely preoccupied with battles over whose neoliberal dogma could piss farther"—*alt.theatre*'s David has unflinchingly offered an alternative avenue for critical discourse (5).

So *are we there yet*? Has *alt.theatre* completed its job?

This is, after all, *twenty-twelve*! If the world doesn't meet its apocalyptic demise by the new year, those who take up activist causes can at least put their feet up with the knowledge that oppression has ended. Canada's official policy of multiculturalism turned forty-one this year and America's first Black president has just locked down his second term. Our Minister of Immigration, Jason Kenney, kept busy in September writing a *Guardian* article assuring readers that "Canada has not become ugly and intolerant" and covertly collecting the email addresses of LGBTQ Canadians in order to send a mass message describing his party's commitment to protecting gay and lesbian refugees. October marks the first International Day of the Girl Child, a sparkly initiative led by Canadian Minister for the Status of Women Rosa Ambrose. (Never mind that Kenney has over the years opposed same-sex marriage, appointed

openly homophobic members to the Immigration and Refugee Board, and removed reference to LGBTQ rights from Canada's Citizenship and Immigration guide. Or that just last month Ambrose voted in favour of Motion 312, which would have reopened the abortion debate and set back her titular "status of women" by decades.) Where is the need for *alt.theatre* in a society that fancies itself post-racial, post-homophobic, post-sexist, and perhaps even post-postal, as print journalism and snail mail flirt with obsolescence?

In 6.4, Little answered his own query with, "Apparently not." We weren't yet there then, and we certainly haven't yet arrived. A glance around the country reminds us that Alberta very nearly put the Wildrose Party in the provincial legislature this past spring, a cohort boasting candidates like Ron Leech (who publically explained how his whiteness rendered him a more accessible candidate than any Muslim or Sikh alternative) and Alan Hunsperger (whose blog espoused some of the most virulently homophobic remarks north of Westboro) ("Wildrose"). Pauline Marois' recently elected Parti Quebecois—whose Francocentric prerogative necessarily precludes cultural pluralism—campaigned promising to prohibit civil servants from wearing non-Christian religious apparel ("Ban"). This past August, the Bank of Canada purged a design for a new $100-dollar bill that featured an Asian-looking woman, opting instead for a more "neutral [Caucasian] ethnicity" (Beeby).

alt.itudes | *Where are we right now?*

What heights have we reached? What is progress and are we making it? While I harbour an apprehensive disinclination to cry *progress!*, I have begun learning how to embrace signposts of social change. With regard to culturally diverse and Aboriginal theatre in Canada, there have been many such instances in recent years. The AD-HOC (Artists Driving Holistic Organizational Change) Committee, a coalition of over forty theatre organizations in Canada working toward ethno-cultural equity in the industry, identified in their inaugural statement of values that not a single culturally diverse arts organization in Canada owned a performance space. This year, that barrier began to break with Native Earth Performing Arts announcing their 120-seat black box studio in the Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre. Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company artistic director Curtis Peeteetuce claims in his interview with Stuart Wright that the upcoming translation of *How the Chief Stole Christmas* into Cree may very well make it the first-ever full-length play to be professionally produced in Canada wholly in a First Nations language. Peter Hinton, in his stated quest to diversify the stages of the National Arts Centre, fulfilled the theatres's decades-old dream to mount an all-Aboriginal production of *King Lear*—although not without its problems, as Kathryn Prince discusses in "Assimilating Shakespeare in the National Arts Centre's Algonquin *King Lear*." These and other signposts of progress remind us that while we might not be *there yet*, the indicators on the journey are victorious destinations in themselves.

alt.ogether | *Where do we go next?*

How will existing systems of oppression impact performing artists and arts policy in the future when *all* live performance nowadays seems to be relegated to the shadows of media better suited to capitalistic enterprise? Will the digital age at last kill the stage arts? Will technology render human performance obsolete? Will all actors one day be replaced by machines and "doing the robot" become known simply as "dancing"?

As a neoliberal agenda continues to erode publicly funded culture, artists and arts workers are being forced to spend increasingly larger amounts of their time lobbying and fundraising instead of nurturing their communities through creative processes and products. The need for strategic essentialism seems imperative if allies of the arts want to prove to their detractors and to policy makers that cultural investment begets social and economic benefit. But strategic essentialism, as is seen time and again, only serves to silence those marginalized by power structures within movements. The Occupy movement saw many women fall victim to sexual violence in the street camps, and provoked indigenous communities to question the protests' neocolonial nomenclature—both groups were repeatedly silenced in the name of supporting the greater cause. People of colour who contested the performance of blackface and other iterations of white privilege during the Quebec student strike were paid little attention by those at the centre of the organizing, who preferred to keep the question of tuition hikes as sole focus.

In her Dispatch, Savannah Walling reflects on the widespread arts cuts and suggests, "To build healthy communities, all of us are needed. We contribute through art because we're artists, guided by the ethic of reciprocity as we focus on creative projects tailored for and with our community." As Canada's arts industries continue to grapple with reduced resources and artistic censorship, *alt.theatre* will continue to situate the roots of the conversation at *community*. With an understanding that all art is born of communities, has political motivations (whether conscious or unconscious), and holds the potential for social change, *alt.theatre* will remain a venue to explore diverse and provocative works at both the centre and periphery of the (inter)national imagination.

ERRATUM

On page 31 of Stephanie Lambert's article in Vol 9.4, we incorrectly identified the person in Ruth Borgford's photo of *Embrace* as Hazel Venzone—this was in fact an audience member. *alt.theatre* apologizes and regrets the error.surfaces."

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The rez sisters REDUX ...?

BY DANIEL DAVID MOSES

1. "When it dawned on me, one cloudy day, that my career as a playwright had been destroyed by political correctness, I just about died. I wanted to throw myself under a subway train and just call it a day."

So wrote Tomson Highway in an essay entitled "Should Only Native Actors Have the Right to Play Native Roles?" published in *Prairie Fire* in 2001 and then included as an addendum to the book of his musical play, *Rose* (Talonbooks, 2003). Tomson's memoir continues:

> I was horrified! After all that work? After all those years of struggle and of hope and of prayer and of pain and of tears and of more struggle, against odds that were impossible to begin with? But how can it be? How can the voice of a playwright be silenced? By a method so brutally effective as political correctness? In a country supposedly as civilized as Canada? Questions like this, and others like them, resounded through my brain over and over and over again.

So it's now a decade after the publication of that dramatic *cri de coeur* and I'm making my way up the steep wooden staircase into the Factory Theatre in Toronto. I remember, after I glance at Tomson's familiar black and white headshot posted in the lobby, that it's close to the playwright's birthday, a day in the first week of December. Could it even be today? This time around—2011—makes the man sixty years old, and that means the play I'm now, and again, so ready to see as I step through the lobby and up into the auditorium has also been around, well, a while now too. And although I've arrived a good fifteen minutes early, the place is almost filled up—it's a Friday night—and I'm forced to take a seat in the slightly-lower-than-the-stage second row and on the aisle.

Despite what Tomson perceived a decade ago about the fate of his playwriting career overall, the play that started it—and more—moving forward ("…that 'first' play,…I speak here of *The Rez Sisters*, which, in fact, was my sixth…"—he also put the record straight in that essay) is certainly still, or again, pulling them in off the streets. What began back in November of 1986 as a co-production of two small companies (Native Earth Performing Arts and Act IV Theatre) utilizing the gymnasium/auditorium at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, in the flurry of production and touring activity that resulted, had also included a run here in the main space auditorium of the Factory Theatre where I'm now contemplating seeing it again.

When Tomson became the artistic director of Native Earth—which had first been formed by a group of Aboriginal actors to focus on performance and training, most notably clown work with Richard Pochinko—he was forced to recruit a new board of directors, including me (the board members that hired him having, every one of them, gotten jobs outside the city of Toronto in the interim). But that facilitated his move to a new emphasis for the company. He wanted to focus on plays, his own *The Rez Sisters* only the first of several concoctions, including a few of mine, that the company would produce and promote. But Act IV Theatre—as I remember it, a quartet of young artists out of York University, director Larry Lewis, actress Sally Singal, stage manager Joseph Boccia, and playwright Eugene Stickland—was a victim of our success. The production of *The Rez Sisters* called for the talents of the first three (Eugene headed west), and the company Act IV, as such, was history.

Later in that same "Native Actors" essay, Tomson did admit, and even attest with bravado, that *The Rez Sisters* "was successful. And it has never really stopped playing ever since, somewhere in the world, giving continued employment to many, many, many actors both Native and non-Native. As it will do probably forever—your grandchildren will be playing in *The Rez Sisters*!"

But he does refer, with that aside about the employment of actors "both Native and non-Native," to what he perceived as the primary reason his playwriting career was in ruins and his other envisioned works have not been produced.

The playwright talked in those early heady days about having a "septology" in the works, a series of plays based on the characters and community of the imaginary Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve located on the actual but certainly fabled Manitoulin Island. And it did seem that the success of *The Rez Sisters* with its Biggest Bingo in the World, and its even more successful sequel, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kaspuskasing*, with its offstage hockey-playing, emasculating women, did promise that such an ambitious and long-term project could be in the offing.

Dry Lips…, after a first production in 1989 at and with the mid-sized Theatre Passe Muraille, and after winning four Dora Mavor Moore awards, including Best New Play, became even more famed with a second production at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto, *the* mainstream for-profit venue in the English-speaking part of the country—the first original play by a Canadian playwright, let alone an Aboriginal writer, to be produced there. Was it even part of a subscription season? Tomson's ambition—as that introductory biographical essay in the book of *The Rez Sisters* reminds us, "to make 'the rez' cool, to show and celebrate what funky folk Canada's Indian people really are," seemed well on the way to realization.

But then a decade passed before a third play of that seven, *Rose*, a musical, made even a fleeting appearance. It is a theatre world commonplace that musicals take a long time to come to term, and that their difficult gestation is a process that ends with many stillbirths, but those of us in the Native Earthling audience were innocent mostly of that knowledge and impatient. What was taking so long? Tomson's career had had such uncommon momentum. And we wanted, with an exuberant energy we well may have learned from the imagination that crafted those first two plays, to see what would happen next to those crazy Wasaychigan Hill inhabitants. His breakthrough was part of our breakthrough, part of the rare attention being paid at long last to those of us obscured by the idea of "the Indian problem" and kept till then out of sight in, historically, residential schools—Tomson himself had attended such an institution—or on reserves or in the poorer parts of Canada's cities. We were, thanks in part to *The Rez Sisters*, suddenly something the media had time for, a column for, political or human interest, at least for a while, in the midst of its other concerns.

And the record does show that the play *Rose*'s development was being professionally supported by our own Native Earth Performing Arts, as well as the Manitoba Theatre Centre (*the* mainstream venue in Tomson's home province), the National Arts Centre, and the PlayRites Colony of the Banff Centre for the Arts. It was clearly both aesthetically and financially going to be a big deal.

2.

I was in Banff at the Arts Centre, a writer taking part in a visual artist residency focused around Aboriginal themes—so it was probably in 1992, that five-hundredth anniversary year of Columbus stumbling onto American soil—and had the luck to have my sojourn there coincide with the part of the Centre's playwrights' colony, at which Tomson and director/dramaturge Larry Lewis were working on the script that eventually became *Rose*.

Tomson's presence at the Centre, or at least his celebrity, was part of the atmosphere in the cafeteria and after-hours bar, but the man himself was little seen. Rumour, therefore, over breakfast had it that he was staying up all through the short summer nights digging out pages and pages from the mountain of his Rockies-sized, Cree-inflected theatrical imagination and that Larry was spending the long mornings sifting them for gold while Tomson finally slept. The breakfast eaters, myself included, were all excited by the promise and the artistic romance of their activity. And we were curious.

The play, someone whispered, included some twenty characters, almost every character from both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips…* , plus new creations. So when it came time to test what Tomson and Larry had accomplished, it was necessary to call for help and take advantage of all of us other Aboriginals and our voices at the Centre because of the visual arts residency. A bunch of us were asked to be part of the first reading of the play and we were, of course, eager to comply.

Although it might have seemed from those appellations as if a musical comedy writer's imagination had managed to shape parts of real life, the names were believable if not always as plentiful as in *The Rez Sisters*. Once again, I'm reminded that part of Tomson's training was in classical and other music, that he had even worked for a time to become a concert pianist until he realized such a career would entirely alienate him from his own community. This quality of determined playfulness in the use of language, a focus often associated with pre-literate, storytelling cultures, seems somehow an essential part of what seduced critics and had them perceiving the clearly stylized play *The Rez Sisters* as *the* authentic representation of Aboriginal life, rather than the individual style of one particular artist trying to bridge that gap to mainstream sensibilities.

It was so reassuring to hear those characters again, there in the bracing air of the mountains, so good to hear the way they played out and played the language, that the dark story of *Rose*, with its shocking mythic, tragic denouement, seemed entirely inevitable and satisfying. Under the wash of internationally flavoured pop music and Tomson's comic caricatures, in a style that used and abused showbiz kitsch and spectacle, calling for a load of "theatre magic" and "suspension of disbelief" (In Tomson's production notes in the book of the play he insists, "Well, for one thing, there *are no* motorcycles. I repeat: it is all illusion."), a story about the LaCremes, a First Nations version of The Supremes, rising to international acclaim, is contrasted with another thread that follows a reserve casino being created

"RUMOUR, THEREFORE, OVER BREAKFAST HAD IT THAT HE WAS STAYING UP ALL THROUGH THE SHORT SUMMER NIGHTS DIGGING OUT PAGES AND PAGES FROM THE MOUNTAIN OF HIS ROCKIES-SIZED, CREE-INFLECTED THEATRICAL IMAGINATION AND THAT LARRY WAS SPENDING THE LONG MORNINGS SIFTING THEM FOR GOLD WHILE TOMSON FINALLY SLEPT."

As the many scenes of the at-that-time almost three-hour draft opus came out of our collective mouths around that large table, delight mixed with astonishment and relief. "Gosh," I remember thinking, "I've missed these characters." Philomena Moosetail, Emily Dictionary, Creature Nataways, Pierre Saint Pierre. "Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera!" as someone among those characters might well have said. Even though we only skimmed the song lyrics, not attempting to engage with that entire other dimension of the piece, the giddy engagement with English that Tomson utilizes as he translates and tries to communicate his ebullient experience of his mother tongue Cree did more than a little to entertain and seduce us. Its poetry and humour, its music and parody, its imagination, lifted us into the play's world.

A friend who had resisted seeing the revival I'm going to view tonight for fear it will disappoint her, her memory of that first production was so treasured, reminded me that one of the things that made *The Rez Sisters* so oddly credible, if one knew something of the community lives of reserves or even Indian friendship centres, were those seemingly fanciful names.

and then handed over to the mafia despite the Chief's and the community's wishes. These stories result in a surreal ceremonial castration of the play's villain and the assassination of its heroine. In that first reading, the clear horror of the play's ending, played out with irony against the sweet pop music background, felt true and almost European in its sensibility. And the play's size felt necessary.

The reading left us replete and looking forward to the day the play would open. Of course, a great deal of our Native Earthling excitement came from the play's daring to be both large ("Epic!" someone commented breathlessly) and from our local and ongoing Indian political situation.

But though the best Canadian prejudices allow us to join in on fights overseas, against apartheid, for instance (I'm reminded of the contemporary Indian commonplace that Canada's reserve system served as model for the townships or *bantustans* of South Africa.), we are not able or unwilling to do anything about such situations in our own country. And it seems to be an accepted artistic director fact of life in the theatre that Canadians certainly don't want to hear about local politics from the stage.

Despite the profoundly entertaining nature of *Rose* and its gestures toward world culture (the running gag about which even more prominent personage would next be "un-invited to Chief Big Rose's ceremony to give the land back to the Indians" constantly expands the question about who has the power to define our cultural identity and individual humanity), it was finally about Canadian politics. After the almost apolitical character studies of the tragicomic *The Rez Sisters* ("Life's like that, even if we are Indians.") and the colonized sexual politics of *Dry Lips…* ("The Hell of Indian Warrior Men without Power"), the comic presentation of the corruption of reserve politics and society at large in *Rose* felt like the next logical step in Tomson's exploration of the situation of Indians in Canada.

Unlike the two earlier plays, which included mythic Nanabush trickster figures, *Rose* instead made use of female ghosts, Rosetta and Rosabella, bringing us closer to a historical understanding of the haunted colonial dilemma Western culture has put First Nations in. The play's third centre, Big Chief Rose, a reinvention of the character Pelajia Patchnose from *The Rez Sisters* ("ANNIE: Pelajia for Chief! I'd vote for you."), was moving forward, acting on her dissatisfaction, and becoming part of the public story, the history, the "his-story" the Wasaychigan Hill Reserve was forced to operate inside.

And so nothing happened theatrically for seven more years. One imagines that all the usual reasons for a play not getting produced professionally were articulated behind the scenes. The story of *Rose*, this imaginary list begins, appeals to too small a demographic, is too specific culturally, not universal enough, too marginal in interest, too provincial, yes, not mainstream. And then again, its political content doesn't fit the theatre's mandate to entertain and it wouldn't appeal to or reflect the apolitical experiences of the subscription audiences. And of course, it would just be far too expensive due (this is surely the sort of concern Tomson is responding to with his muttering about "only Native actors getting to play Native roles") to the politically correct necessity of auditioning and hiring an out-of-town cast—"out-of-town" in this case being a euphemism for "Indian."

In the meantime, Tomson began his parallel career as a prose writer with a well-received novel called *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, 1998—a story loosely inspired by the lives of his late brother, Rene, and himself—and with books for children called *Caribou Song*, 2001, *Dragon Fly Kites*, 2002, and *Fox on Dry Ice*, 2003.

Also in the meantime, Tomson's long-time collaborator, director, and dramaturge died. The book of the play *Rose* is dedicated "To the memory of, and in thanks to, a friend, an extraordinary dramaturge, and an even more extraordinary director, Larry Evan Lewis, 1964-1995. This script burns with the wisdom, the immense generosity, and the courage of your spirit. To the memory of a man who was never afraid of dreaming big. Igwani kwayus, niweecheewagan."

The book of the play also records, "The world premiere […] was most generously—and miraculously—accomplished by the University College Drama Programme, University College, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario on the night of January 31, 1999, under the guidance of two extraordinary women: Dr. Pia Kleber (head of the University College Drama Programme), who was the producer, and Leah Cherniak, who was the director."

3.

The Rez Sisters starts again, as it always has, with that surprising first stage image, that quirky setting, a middle-aged Indian woman perched on the roof of her own house—although since this is the theatre, we only need see the tilted plane of the roof itself. The woman's dressed in faded denim coveralls and her eyes are shaded by the peak of a baseball cap. She's wielding with some rhythm a hammer to nail shingles into place—or at least that's what she, the actress, is indicating, the middle-aged actress, who this time around is Jani Lauzon, Jani with whom I worked on one of my own plays twenty years ago, when she was of an age to play a young lover.

Yes, I have to admit that I go way back, way back not only with the play and the phenomenon of *The Rez Sisters*, but also with a good chunk of this current rendition's cast. This production's Philomena Moosetail, Kyra Harper, its Nanabush, Billy Merasty, its Zhaboonigan Peterson, Care Gee, and its Veronique St. Pierre, Jean Yoon, have all been part of or had parts in productions of my own plays. And I've watched with great pleasure and admiration—yes, I'm a fan—the burgeoning career of young talent Michaela Washburn, who plays Emily Dictionary. And, even though I spend most of any Toronto theatre season these days away in Kingston, I find I'm even aware of Pamela Sinha, but as a budding playwright. I suspected I wouldn't be able to be in any way objective about this production as soon as I scoped that credits page of the program.

And now the play's action starts, Pelajia Patchnose pausing in her shingling work to mutter that first line, "Philomema. I want to go to Toronto." Philomema's answer, a distant voice that seems to originate offstage: "Oh, go on."

I'm immediately back into the rhythms and spaces of the piece, almost able to mouth the lines of the monologues along with the actors. Jani's rendition of Pelajia's first big speech, "Sure as I'm sitting way up here on the roof of this old house," painting a picture of Manitoulin Island on summer day, settles down in my ears comfortably with my memory of Gloria Miguel in that first production saying the same line. I sit back and enjoy the ride.

The only unknown cast factor for me in this new production is the young black actress Djennie Laguerre as Annie Cook, who,

from her program note, appears to also be bilingual. Her ability to deal with the character's comic road runner-speedy spirit quickly eases my one qualm about her seeming to be a bit young to have a daughter living in Toronto. She's got the essence of the character down in her vivacity, and since this is theatre, I'd feel foolish demanding a documentary literalness of a play that works language like a poem.

Djennie's blackness does cause some momentary consternation for one of the more literal-minded ladies in the audience during the intermission. She's actually whispering so loudly two rows behind me about not knowing there was a history of slavery on Manitoulin Island (as far as I know, there's not), I can't help but eavesdrop, even though I don't turn around. But her friend has read some of the publicity and can fill her in that part of the talked-up point of this revival was the idea of using non-Aboriginal actors to play Aboriginals, doing the sort of non-traditional casting more usually reserved for enlivening the canonized Western classics. The idea seems to be that such an imaginative practice will allow this contemporary Canadian classic to surmount the literal-minded limitations of political correctness (As Tomson also satirizes, in the aforementioned essay, the extremes of that unimaginative position: "Thought Police Productions presents an All-German-Cast in *Mother Courage* by Bertold [sic] Brecht. Only Germans need apply."). The lady two rows behind me is not entirely convinced by her friend's explication.

"SHE'S NOT THE ONLY ONE..."

She's not the only one, I later discover, to doubt the strategy works. Richard Ouzounian of the *Toronto Star*, who describes the play as having earned "a place in our theatre canon for presenting the life of native Canadians in what was perceived to be an honest light for the first time," feels that in this production the play has "lost any authenticity […] The one remaining note of true authenticity […] Nanabush, one of the various names of the Trickster in native mythology […] seems to have come from another play, not this well-meaning but ultimately self-defeating attempt at being open-minded [...] Is *The Rez Sisters* a good play? I have my doubts after seeing this production, but I'm willing to give it another chance. Just not like this one. Please."

Though this revival for a new generation of *The Rez Sisters*—or of any play recognized as having some value (The funding schemes of the arts councils as I remember them were once so focused on new product that such revivals seemed rare and unlikely and at the whim of other sorts of funders.)—feels like a sign of a maturing theatre scene, it does seem odd to rationalize this theatre play revival with the challenge that non-traditional casting might present to tokenism and stereotyping.

Consider that the original production of the play did the same sort of casting. The first Annie Cook was played by Anne Anglin and the first Zhaboonigan Peterson by, as I said, Act IV's Sally Singal, neither of whom, I'm pretty sure, identified as an Indian, not that we actually had time to talk about it. I suspect that casting was done entirely for practical reasons. After being literal-minded—and family-oriented—enough to bring in some out-of-town Indians, the respected New York actresses and also Monique Mojica's mother and aunt, Gloria Miguel and Muriel Miguel, to play Pelajia and Philomena, there were still two parts that needed casting and, because we were putting up a piece of theatre, we felt it was doable to ask the audience to exercise their sympathy, empathy, and imaginations and pretend the two white ladies were Indians. And it worked back then.

And it's working for me now, even though this mixed up, non-traditional cast includes, in addition to those actresses whose biographical notes in the program clearly connect them with the Aboriginal theatre scene or community, actresses who, from such evidence, feel no need to articulate any cultural connection, who indicate only their profession and artistic accomplishments, leaving us with only their names from which to draw any connections and conclusions. Race, beyond what little there is in the content of the play, is not part of the face of the production, unless the absence of any so-to-speak white women in the cast might suggest the issue in the context of the publicity. Maybe poor Djennie is supposed to serve as an oblique reminder of—what seems as the action of the play seduces us—a distant problem? With Bingo the solution, it's the absence of money, poverty, that seems the present issue.

But, I realize, this revival, despite my vague discomfort with some of the ideas that have reportedly attended its conception (*The Globe and Mail*'s feature headline was "A new staging of *The Rez Sisters* defies political correctness"), still feels simply like a homecoming. So it's not quite surprise I'm feeling when the stage business of preparing for the Bingo game starts up, when Bingo Master Billy Merasty appears in his sequined tuxedo announcing the game the audience will get to take part in.

> BINGO MASTER: And all you have to do, ladies and gentlemen, is reach into your programs and extract the single bingo card placed therein. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the single bingo card placed therein, which bingo card will entitle you to one chance at winning the warm-up game for a prize of $20. $20! …

Those many years ago, when the play played here and I was here too, a board member of Native Earth, volunteering as an usher (board members for the company did that sort of thing back then) I won the Bingo!—but had to give my twenty dollars back because of my connection to the production. I'm suddenly sure, or at least some small kid part of me is, that I could win again and this time get to keep the twenty.

Bingo Master Billy starts calling out the numbers, one and then another and another, and Djennie Laguerre's Annie Cook, like the rest of the characters, slips off the stage into the auditorium. Annie Cook sits down in the aisle beside me and starts helping me play, pointing to where I should be punching holes in my bingo card. Her breathless Annie, whispering over my shoulder, reminds me now so much of Anne Anglin's version (or maybe just of the Anne Anglin who directed my first play) that the small kid part of me gets even more sure I'm going to win.

And after a very, very long game—there are actually two directions I could have almost won with on my little card—someone else is the lucky one. But the exercise in futility has primed me and everyone else in the audience to understand something of the experience the Rez Sisters are about to have next as they play THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD.

The play takes me home again, through tragedy and small winnings and back to the roof top where the action began, but now there's a spirit, Nanabush as a seagull, definitely there and dancing to the beat of Jani/Pelajia's hammer. And I rise to my feet to applaud what feels to me like a return to a kind of clear and youthful theatrical innocence.

"DO MOST CANADIANS (NOT THE ONES MS. ATWOOD IN *SURVIVAL* IMAGINED HOLED UP IN FORTS IN THE FACE OF THE FIERCE WILDERNESS, BUT THE REST WHO WENT OUT ON THE LAND FOR WHOM THE WILDERNESS WAS ROUGH GOING BUT NOT QUITE THAT HOSTILE), LIKE ANY REZ SISTER, LONG FOR THE BIG CITY?"

With a few other theatre and artist types—one's a young director I recognize—I hang on in the bar after the show to say hello. I get introduced to Djennie Laguerre and thank her for her help with my Bingo card. I also say hello and goodnight to Jani Lauzon and Jean Yoon who just pass through since they have babysitters at home. And actor Billy Merasty—who's played the Nanabush character in this production a quarter century after his uncle, modern dancer Rene Highway, originated the role—admits over ginger ale, before he himself heads out to walk home, that it's more than a bit challenging to be jumping around the stage like that now that he's in his fifties.

4. The Factory Theatre's promotion of this production claimed:

> The exuberant Canadian classic is reimagined.
>
> *The Rez Sisters* premiered in 1986, capturing the country's imagination and firmly establishing Tomson Highway as one of Canada's national treasures. In *The Rez Sisters*, seven women all dream of winning The Biggest Bingo in the World. They band together to raise money for a trip from their community to Toronto — to change their luck and their lives.

How did Tomson Highway, this Cree musician and playwright born on a trap line in a snow bank—the story goes—on the outer reaches of Manitoba, make that connection a generation ago with the Canadian audience, a connection the rest of Canada's indigenous population experiences only intermittently? What was it about *The Rez Sisters* that reached down from the north of Manitoba, from Tomson's imagined Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, across the boundaries of the reserve system to touch all those beating hearts in the cities of Canada?

I'm wondering if now the Rez Sisters—Pelajia and Philomena, Marie-Adele, Annie and Emily, Veronique and Zhaboonigan—all seven of them, could be, since we're in the realm of theatre here, Canada's version of Russia's gift to world theatre, Olga and Masha and Irina, Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*.

(Yes, yes, there is a First Nations' Three Sisters, since those of us of the Iroquois and matrilineal persuasion have our own trio of mythic if not fictive persons or spirits who embody the central characters of our agricultural practice, Corn, Beans and Squash. But I'm not thinking of them right now.)

"I wanna go to Toronto," declares Pelajia, from her sunny rooftop, the first line of the play *The Rez Sisters*, declaring a theme. This desire is one she shares, we discover as the play plays out, with the rest of the women in the play, this desire for the bright lights of the distant city of Toronto in the late twentieth century—just as Olga and her loved ones longed for Moscow a century earlier. It feels vaguely embarrassing to even be saying the names of the two cities, mythic Moscow, bright and shiny new Hogtown, in the same breath, but there I go, feeling colonial, a habit it's hard to break.

Perhaps the mythic weight of the seven Rez Sisters, situated as they are on the fictional Indian reserve of Wasaychigan Hill on the beautiful and real Manitoulin Island—Are all such islands the abode of spirits?— in the middle of Ojibwa country, is somehow connected to the Seven Grandfathers, in one translation Courage, Generosity, Tolerance, Strength of Character, Patience, Humility, and Wisdom, those essential and recognized values of that culture? So maybe Chekhov's three ladies are somehow connected to Christianity's Big Trio, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost? Or perhaps Faith, Hope, and Charity, a.k.a. Love?

Do most Canadians (not the ones Ms. Atwood in *Survival* imagined holed up in forts in the face of the fierce wilderness, but the rest who went out on the land for whom the wilderness was rough going but not quite that hostile), like any Rez sister, long for the big city? You don't have to be corralled on a reserve to feel like country mice—even though our demographers, as long as the census lasts, testify that most of us in Canada already live in the metropolis. Is that part of our colonized history and continuing reality? Even those of us already living in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, still want to go to NYC or LA. And there's always Paris, even if the French are, I've heard, impossibly rude (I should ask Tomson, who winters in France, how true that is the next time I see him).

In this longing for the green of the other side's grass, the emerald city, did all Canadians who saw *The Rez Sisters* feel themselves a little bit Indian? Is that why we thought the Rez Sisters with their continuing hopefulness, their undefeatedness, were worthy back then of so much celebration?

***

Tomson Highway's play, *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout*, commissioned by the Secwepmemc Cultural Education Society of the Kamploops Indian Reserve, premiered at the Sagebrush Theatre, Western Canada Theatre, Kamloops, British Columbia, on Saturday, January 24, 2004.

His newest work, *The (Post) Mistress*, a one-woman musical, premiered at the Ode'min Giizis Festival, Peterborough, Ontario, June 21-24, 2012.

There Isn't One Way to Find Yourself: An Interview with Curtis Peeteetuce

BY STUART WRIGHT

The Saskatoon Native Theatre Company (SNTC) is one of a handful of Canadian pioneers building the young enterprise of indigenous professional theatre. In addition to its full season of works by Canadian indigenous playwrights, SNTC runs a summer program, called Circle of Voices, for First Nations youth. This program provides its participants with the means and opportunity to tell their own stories, but it also acts as something of a farm team for SNTC and allied companies—in fact the actor, director, playwright, and musician Curtis Peeteetuce, since 2011 the artistic director of SNTC, got his own start in Circle of Voices.

Peeteetuce's play *An Act of Elusion*,[1] which will be in workshop at Vancouver's Talking Stick Festival in February 2013, depicts the ritual soul-struggle of James, a Cree man torn between inheritances. Under the inquisition of a sweat ceremony, James finds, in the pop culture he loves, a ground on which the destiny of his Cree origin and the fate of his urban uprootedness from it might be brought into meaningful relation. By playing games of representation with his alter ego, Jim Morrison, and his guide and adversary, David Letterwoman (each figuring an unsettled federation of opposites), James achieves a clear-eyed vision of his original trauma that elevates it into potent mythic sense. He also achieves contact with an internal current, vital and Cree-speaking, that will begin healing the cut of the blade.

In August I was fortunate to speak to Peeteetuce at his office overlooking a rehearsal space in SNTC's new building, which it shares with the francophone theatre company La Troupe du Jour.

* * *

STUART: What does the future look like for some of the artists who perform here? For the kids you bring in for the Circle of Voices program?

CURTIS: It looks very promising. It starts right from theatre school: Persephone Theatre has a theatre school; we have a youth summer drama camp. We tell our young people to move on. There's a drama program at the University of Saskatchewan if you want to get your degree in that as well, so we're definitely making sure there are no voids in the artist's journey in Saskatoon.

We've identified in Saskatoon that we need to walk together and hold hands with La Troupe du Jour, Persephone Theatre, Live Five, the U of S Drama Department. If Saskatchewan doesn't have a theatre alliance, I think these are the first steps towards that. It's all informal for now. But there is a strong theatre culture in Saskatoon. All organizations provide promo and support for each other. In some cases, we will partner on special events and discuss co-production opportunities for the future. We've cross-pollinated work and we cross-pollinate artists as well. For our Circle of Voices youth program, the U of S Drama Department will provide some in-class time and E. D. Feehan High School is allowing us to use their facility.

STUART: What's the history of that? Is that sense of alliance a fairly recent thing?

CURTIS: Yeah, it's very recent in my mind. I'm pretty sure that organizations have been supporting each other over the past thirty or forty years in some fashion—but it was not as prominent as it is now. It's taking on a very multicultural kind of worldview in terms of putting theatre and the arts together. But it's also enriching and honouring the traditions of both Aboriginal theatre and Euro-Canadian theatre.

STUART: How do you and other theatre organizations bridge some of those divides?

CURTIS: Shakespeare on the Saskatchewan has a young Cree fellow who's from Beardy's (and Okemasis First Nation): his name is Aren Okemaysim. He's there to assist new Shakespeare audience members with understanding what Shakespeare is all about, so he gets to do that with Aboriginal families should they come to the Shakespeare show. He'll sit with them and talk with them about Shakespeare and give them kind of a crash course on what the play is about and the experience they're about to have.

STUART: Does the annual Christmas show you do help you keep in touch year-to-year with the directing side of your job?

CURTIS: Yes, definitely, and the playwriting, because I'm the playwright for the show. But it's also the hardest artistic time for me in the season because I often end up being a performer in the show as well: if somebody gets sick, or if somebody can't make one performance, then I end up in the show. So I wear that hat as well, and my head is wrapped around the Christmas show year-round because I'm already planning for next year's production. This year we're doing *How the Chief Stole Christmas*. In the world of band governance there are a lot of challenges and a lot of successes, so you have the negative and the positive side of being a chief. That is addressed through comedy in this production. Every Christmas show is a comedy for us, and it's about three grandmothers, or *kookums* we call them, at Christmastime.

STUART: Do you find that comedy is one of the best ways of getting at social issues?

CURTIS: Yeah, because within the Aboriginal worldview humour is recognised and acknowledged, very important, because it has gotten us through a lot of dark times in our recent history. But it also is a way of us checking in with each other, and understanding what the parameters are in terms of what is amusing and what is abusing—learning to identify those two things.

STUART: Can you talk about *In the Midst of Memory*?

CURTIS: That was my first play. I was trying to be an actor, trying to be famous and trying to be rich and have all the girls swooning over me and Googling me. But that never happened, sorry to say. I decided to write a play, and I was intrigued by our Trickster character. I thought to myself, he's always been revealed to me as a spiritual phenomenon, but in some of the older stories of Trickster, he's actually a human, with human traits. So I wrote a story in which he was approached by the Creator to come and help a woman find the daughter she gave up at birth. But when he locates the daughter he falls in love with her, and he's not supposed to be doing that, he's supposed to be helping the mother. So that is his first dilemma. His conflict is internal, and he curses the Creator. He says, "Why me? Why can't I be with this woman? Why am I supposed to help? I hate you, I hate you for doing this to me and giving me this life, this existence."

So that's the nature of that story, and I didn't have a typewriter or computer, so I hand-wrote it. I wrote an 87-page play with pen and paper. I keep that at home as a reminder that, wow, I must have really wanted to write.

STUART: One of the themes of this season is people caught between different identities, and you've talked a little elsewhere about that issue in your own life. In *Agokwe* or *Cafe Daughter* you

have protagonists who are very much torn between conflicting identities, for example. What is so compelling about that kind of story, and what's generative about it?

CURTIS: I think what is most compelling is that it is universal in terms of all of us searching for our identity. I think we're always searching for that. I mean, you look around the world and see that societies, contemporary or old, are always searching for something. Today, people are looking towards some of the Eastern traditions—yoga, meditation. We're always looking for something that will give us a greater connection to the outside concrete world, be it heaven, be it the Happy Hunting Grounds. People have so many names for things. An elder once told me: We have different existences throughout our time, and one of our lessons to learn in this time is to learn love. That's one of the laws we have to learn, so that we're able to move on to the next existence and find out what it is we're supposed to learn there.

So with all the worldviews and paradigms of the post-life, I think we are always on a search for truth, for identity, to give us more assurance about our time here. I think that's what a lot of stories do in theatre: when you see one character struggling with their own identity, they're searching for themselves.

"I myself just found out that Peeteetuce comes from the French for bear paws, *pattes d'ours*.

I myself just found out that Peeteetuce comes from the French for bear paws, *pattes d'ours*. When I was growing up, I would ask my mom, "What does Peeteetuce mean?" And she would say it means bear paws, and I said, "No it doesn't. That's not Cree, Mom. You're a liar." Big mistake! Anyways I apologized to her recently; I said, "Mom, you're right, that's where it comes from." So I'm learning a little about my family history that way; it really interests me to search more. What happened? Was someone from my family not present when the Indian agent came, and a French person said, "They call themselves *pattes d'ours*"? Bear paws. Things like that intrigue me, and it comes with challenges, it comes with some conflict—and I think that's what characters endure in shows like *Agokwe* and *Cafe Daughter*. So I think that's one of the most compelling things: the universality of identity and the search for truth.

STUART: And there are a couple of ways you can go with a search for identity. There's a way you can go that says there's this one identity, we have to protect it. It seems that the approach here instead is to entertain a variety of stories about where identity might come from.

CURTIS: Definitely. And I love that, opening those doors and saying, "There isn't one way to find yourself; there are many ways." You know, learn about some of the other ethnic backgrounds in your family tree, for example, find those stories, learn those things, talk to those people. I encourage young people all the time—Ask your mom what this means in Cree, or how to say this in a different language. Go search, go look for those things, and you'll find that it empowers you in some way.

STUART: SNTC has been fairly successful recently at scaling up its funding. In 2008 you were able to significantly increase your annual operating grants from Canada Council. What have been some of the challenges in that process? What strategies have you found successful?

CURTIS: We've had to really not rely on the past language and terminologies that have been used at SNTC. We have a new board and a new staff and a new vision for the company—we're on a search for truth, for our identity. So when Alan and I are writing a grant, we look at all the old grants that were written by the previous general manager, and we say, Okay, so this was the language that was used, this is the format that was used. Let's find ours now, so that when our fellow artists read our grant, they know that Curtis and Alan wrote it and didn't just copy and paste.

We are definitely also pushing a cultural and language agenda for the company as well. For *How the Chief Stole Christmas*, I applied for a translation grant—which is the first that any Aboriginal organization has applied for in history—to translate that play from English into the Cree language. So we'll be producing it in the Cree language, which is also a historical happening for SNTC, and in fact I think for Canada, because I can't recall any First Nations play being produced fluently in the first language. There are other plays that have been written with monologues and maybe one or two scenes in the first

language, but no play has been produced in full. So that's monumental for us. Bruce at Canada Council said, "Curtis! You're the first to apply for this translation grant! Everybody's been applying for Spanish, French, German." So our application got put at the top of the pile, and he said, "Everybody loved your grant, awesome, congratulations." And I went, wow, why weren't we doing this ten years ago?

STUART: Would you say that the focus on culture and language is universally applicable? Is that a direction that more theatre organizations should be going in?

CURTIS: I don't know about that. I think every organization has its own mandate and vision, and those are to be respected because it makes them unique in our ecology. I do hope that if there is a movement for more culture and language in programming, that First Nations will take a lead on that. Because our stories are so rich, our stories are so empowering, they're so connected to who we are as a people. And a lot of our communities, a lot of our people—the elderly, adults, and youth—are so disconnected from these things. I think that's why we see families in crisis, communities in crisis, and I think one of the things in really getting us to stand up, dust off, and say let's move forward is reconnecting with our culture and language. The arts have the ability to do that. Education does as well. Within the schools, I have nieces who are taking the Cree language now and learning it. The arts are doing that and we're making it fun at the same time. We're serving our audiences, we're entertaining, we're educating, and we're having fun doing it as well. So I would hope that First Nations organizations would take the lead on that.

STUART: Who is your audience, and whom do you speak for?

CURTIS: Those are really good questions. I've always been of the opinion that if a political leader is Cree, and they claim to represent the Cree people, they'd better know that language, because the worldview is informed by it. As an artistic director, I have taken on the responsibility of learning my own language, which might as well be Greek to me. It is very important that I can share that worldview, and have our audience members learn from that, through our characters and through our stories.

I don't really see us having a particular audience base. I've seen all audiences coming to our shows, and they'll come up and say, "That was pretty good, thanks for sharing that with us." Sharing is the number one thing in terms of who we are and what we do when we create theatre.

STUART: So there's a focus on telling your own stories.

CURTIS: Yeah, we start there.

STUART: Any final thoughts about the future?

CURTIS: As part of that five- to ten-year vision, I see us incorporating the Dakota language, the Dene culture and language, the Inuit culture and language. All of it. I hope to see that. Because when we say Saskatchewan Native Theatre, we're talking about all the Aboriginal and First Nations groups in our province.

I do see us expanding our partnerships and hopefully forming a theatre alliance one day. I think that's going to give hope to all the young artists who say, "I want to be an actor, but I don't want to move to Toronto to do it." I've talked to so many other young people as well who are saying, "I want to do the arts, but I want to do it at home." I hope SNTC will contribute to that and keep a lot of our artists here.

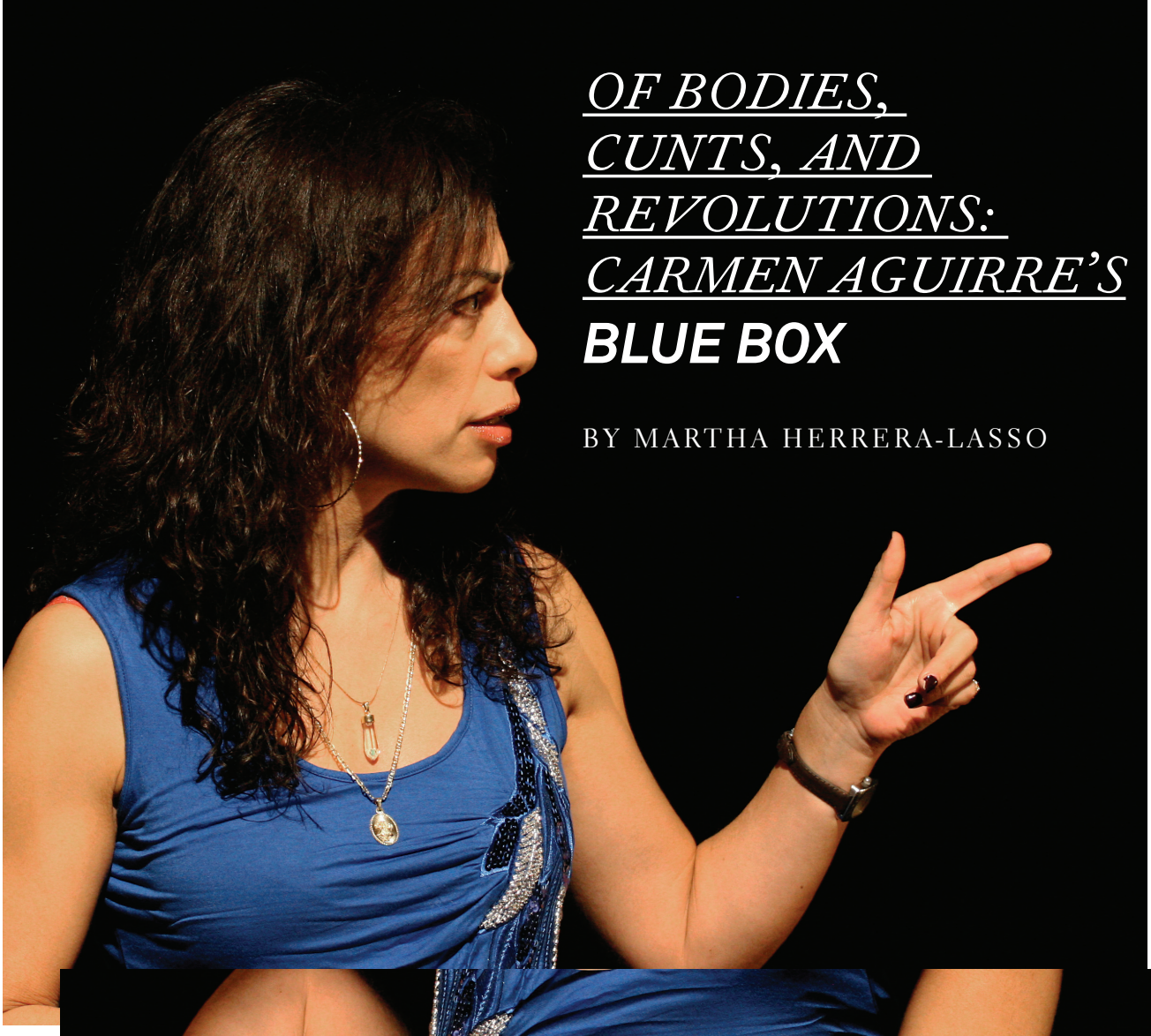
"I do see us expanding our partnerships and hopefully forming a theatre alliance one day.

NOTE

1 SNTC's season program and further information about the company can be viewed at www.sntc.ca.

OF BODIES, CUNTS, AND REVOLUTIONS: CARMEN AGUIRRE'S **BLUE BOX**

BY MARTHA HERRERA-LASSO



© Itai Erdal / All photos Carmen Aguirre in *Blue Box*.

"Hi everyone! Thanks for coming to Blue Cunt."

Standing as close to the audience as sightlines will allow, under house lights that are dimmed but never off, dressed in a bright blue, well-fitted shirt and tight jeans that reveal the shape and movement of her body, Carmen Aguirre greets her audience, framing her groin with her strong hands as she goes on to explain why the show we thought we had come to watch is actually a cover name for the real thing: "Blue Box, Blue Cunt, same thing" (Aguirre 2). In the first thirty seconds of her autobiographical solo play, Aguirre has uninhibitedly captured our full attention: This is her story, her cunt, and she is going to tell us all about it. And for the remainder of the show, we won't be allowed to forget it.

Autobiographies remind us that we are made up of stories and that we are the owners of those stories. They remind us that we have the power to frame and rearrange our memories to create new identities, ascribe meaning to our experiences, and actively take ownership of our past. The spectators' knowledge that a story has occurred in real life gives biography a dimension of truth rarely bestowed upon fiction—it gives the story authenticity and empowers the author as the possessor of truth. Yet knowing that a story has happened to real people does not, unfortunately, make it the truth. When we encounter an autobiographical narrative, we may be impressed by its real life value, but we also know that the truth of the memory is relative to those who remember and the context in which they do so.

YET KNOWING THAT A STORY HAS HAPPENED TO REAL PEOPLE DOES NOT, UNFORTUNATELY, MAKE IT THE TRUTH.

Playwright Sharon Pollock has said, "[I]t is impossible to write or portray a life because it can only be lived" (297), and in this, she is right. Yet it is through these sites of memory (Grace, 20), these public acts of remembrance, that we can formulate a sense of culture and community by telling and witnessing each other's stories. Autobiographical performance takes this concept of real life authenticity a step further: it offers us the body as a three-dimensional text that we can read alongside the spoken word. In this scenario, as in the case of Aguirre's body in *Blue Box*, the body of the performer/subject acts as a living archive[1] in itself, present proof of the story that is being told.

Blue Box is not Aguirre's first autobiographical work, nor is it the first time she has performed herself onstage. Aguirre's life story is a truly fascinating compilation of incidents that evidence many of the social and political conflicts of the twentieth-century Americas, and her biography embodies a unique take on our hemispheric history. Aguirre's family came to Canada when she was six years old, exiled from Chile after the 1973 coup d'état led by General Augusto Pinochet against socialist President Salvador Allende. Five years after her family resettled in Canada, Aguirre's mother and new stepfather took her and her younger sister back to South America in an undercover mission as part of the underground resistance against Pinochet's regime. During her remaining teenage years, Aguirre went back and forth between this secretive life in South America and life in Vancouver with her father. At the age of eighteen, Aguirre joined the resistance herself and for the next four years was dedicated to smuggling goods across the Chilean border. In 1989, general elections were held in Chile and won by Christian democrat candidate Patricio Aylwin, although General Pinochet remained commander in chief of the Chilean army until his arrest in 1998. In 1989 the Chilean resistance dissolved and Aguirre returned to Vancouver to pursue a career in theatre.

Aguirre deals with these issues in many of her plays, sharing her experience as a child refugee (*Chile Con Carne*, 1995 and *The Refugee Hotel*, 2010), a young rape victim in Vancouver (*The Trigger*, 2005), and her time as part of an immigrant community in Canada (*¿Qué Pasa with la Raza, eh?*, 1999). Her teenage years in South America have been most thoroughly recorded in her book *Something Fierce: Memoir of a Revolutionary Daughter*, published in 2011 and winner of the Canada Reads Award. *Blue Box*, commissioned by Nightswimming Theatre prior to Aguirre's development of *Something Fierce*, shares episodes of the revolutionary memoir and her participation in the underground resistance, intertwining them with what she calls "another revolution, the one inside me" (Aguirre, 8)—that is, a more intimate narrative about her sexuality and love life.

In the performance of *Blue Box*, Aguirre stands very close to us. In a relaxed and intimate manner, she shares the most graphic details of her relationship with the gorgeous Chicano actor, Vision Man, who "glows like a Chiapas amber, and his accent wets [her] underwear" (5). She tells us of the blue-eyed neo-Nazi young man in Argentina who followed her for months, "Japanese Style"—a persecution method in which the coercer walks one step behind you, breathing down your neck until you break. We learn of her time prostituting her voice on East Hastings, where she sat in a booth with no air and no breaks, staring at her face for eight hours a day, making sure to always smile and constantly checking her pupils—"'cause when you're turned on your pupils dilate, and dilated pupils can be heard" (23).

There is never a moment during this intertwined storytelling that Aguirre forgets her body—nor does she allow us to forget it. When she speaks so explicitly about herself, I can't help but think that the body Vision Man is about to penetrate is the same body standing so close to me, and that the mouth speaking is the same mouth that "sucked on the soother" for eight hours a day, making the sound of "pussy being eaten" (23) to keep clients happy.

Throughout her performance Aguirre plays and portrays her body in different ways. She talks very explicitly about her body as a site of pleasure, telling us how Vision Man's "tongue is inside [her], his fingers move [her] underwear to the side and he caresses [her] clit" (31), a confession that she probably suspects won't be received with ease in "a country where cobwebs [grow] on your cunt" (5) and where "getting laid is tantamount to reaching the summit at Mount Everest" (6). Her fine-tuned body is the perfect embodiment of the woman she describes, the Queen who wants to get "fucked silly for a week" (17) and who this Chicano boy with no *cojones* has failed to satisfy. Her gaze makes it hard for us to look away; and in this small theatre, with the house lights still on above us, we are forced to react, physically and emotionally, to her sexually charged statements.

But there is more. This strong, fit body, we soon learn, was once a "stilted skeleton," twenty pounds underweight and asexual—"Terror will do that do you" (8). And so we are reminded

that we are witnessing a body that was once injured, consumed by the terror of persecution, torture, and death. We are reminded of the fears of the resistance as she tells us of her friend who survived three years in a concentration camp and is now unable to sleep on a bed because of back problems, who can only eat mashed up rice and suffers from insomnia. More explicitly, Aguirre reminds us that the injured body is the same body that feels pleasure—her stories might be separate in time, but they are all manifested in the body. She takes us to her time in the resistance and tells us about the cousin she had loved as a girl, with whom, years later, she is sitting in a loveseat in a dance club in Chile, caressing the scar on his inner thigh, a scar resulting from a bullet wound and a brutal beating, courtesy of the Argentinean paramilitary. She caresses his scar before they kiss, and on the stage Aguirre places her hand tight on her inner thigh as she shares the story with us.

During her early twenties, self-control led her into a life of asexuality in which avoiding pleasure meant survival. "I haven't come for a while. Like years. This is because I'm afraid. I'm afraid that if I feel any pleasure in my life then I'll screw up the resistance thing and I will fall and my husband will fall. So. No coming" (18). A body that feels pleasure is a body that feels fear, and those who know where to look will find it. Those who know where to look for the fear will look into her eyes and see her pupils dilate and death will ensue—because, as she reminds us throughout the play, "when you come, your pupils dilate. And when you're afraid" (19).

BY INCLUDING THIS STORY, AGUIRRE REVEALS THE CONSTRUCTEDNESS OF HER PERFORMANCE. HER CONFESSIONS, NO MATTER HOW INTIMATE OR TRUTHFUL, HAVE BEEN CREATED TO BE PERFORMED, AND ARE RE-EMBODIED NOT AS MOMENTS OF SEXUAL PLEASURE, BUT AS PERFORMED RECONSTRUCTIONS OF THOSE MEMORIES.

So she plays with a metaphor, telling us that her heart is a hummingbird "trapped in there batting its little wings so hard that I might pass out"—a heart inside a body about to cross the line at the border under a fake name and carrying contraband goods. "My heart is an animal and I plunge a knife into its very core. My heart lies motionless on the floor" (19). She tells us that she has learned to exit and enter her body at will in order to survive, in order to bear the persecution of the blue-eyed man who follows one step behind her, breathing down her neck. "I leave my twenty-pound underweight, newly divorced, twenty-year-old body and walk next to it … I breathe in the desert air, and all this while, his breath lands on the back of my neck" (13).

Aguirre's strong and fit body suddenly takes on new meaning. For one thing, she has recovered from the terror-induced starvation: her body—now standing in front of us, healthy and strong—is the survivor of an almost sure death ("They say you have two years to live if you do border work for the resistance. That means I have one year left" (19)). Yet we have also discovered something that exists inside her, an ability to endure pain and a skill for self-control that does much to explain the tenacity of her presence on stage.

The third plot in *Blue Box* suggests a different approach to sexuality: not one of arousal nor abstention, but one of objectified sexuality. As a phone-sex worker, her relationship with sexuality is neither all-consuming nor evasive—it is pragmatic:

> I work forty hours a week, take two calls at a time, tell them my name is Miranda del Amor, (double Ds and wavy black hair), hear an average of a hundred and twenty men come per day, and suffer from neck and jaw problems. I also worry that my saliva glands will give out, as I suck the soother for about six of the eight-hour shift. When I'm not sucking on the soother I'm tickling the inside of my cheek with my index finger while keeping my upper teeth touching the bottom teeth. This sounds like pussy being eaten (23).

She sounds both detached and relaxed as she shares this story, sitting on a stool somewhat further from the audience than where she began, sipping on a bottle of water, and telling us of how she once made a living performing sexual pleasure. And when I think about it, what she describes seems very similar to what she's been doing for the last hour: creating an intimate atmosphere with the audience, sharing the most explicit details of her sexual past. By including this story, Aguirre reveals the constructedness of her performance. Her confessions, no matter how intimate or truthful, have been created to be performed, and are re-embodied not as moments of sexual pleasure, but as performed reconstructions of those memories. This transformation of memories into a series of staged accounts pointedly confirms Sherrill Grace's remark that "the true life story of an auto/biographical play is the play itself in performance" (24).

It would be impossible to sit in such proximity to Aguirre and witness her performance without thinking about our own bodies. She makes eye contact, singles out audience members, and delivers her most sexually charged lines directly to them, making it difficult not to react to her nearness. Most explicit are the moments in which she directly uses other bodies to construct the narrative. There are two main instances in *Blue Box* in which audience participation is scripted into the performance. Near the beginning of the play, Aguirre invites an audience member to help her illustrate the Japanese Style method of persecution. She follows her guest around while she describes the method, and later invites them onstage once again to play the part of the blue-eyed man. This is a very effective way of explaining what she describes, and inevitably makes us think of our own bodies as she incorporates one of "us" into her storytelling: How would I react if she had chosen me? What would my body look like on stage?

The second instance of scripted audience participation is equally effective in making us aware of our bodies, although it doesn't seem to serve a purpose in terms of the narrative of the play. After one of her few pauses, Aguirre ends Act One with a dance break. A salsa song begins to play and Aguirre dances to it for a short time. Soon, she invites people onto the stage to dance with her, and in turn asks them to do the same with other audience members. For the duration of the song (which feels very long) Aguirre and a few others dance on the stage. It is an awkward moment for those onstage and for many off stage—a very forward way of sharing her culture: I will not show you how we dance where I'm from, I will invite you to dance with me.

Aguirre doesn't ease her audience into the dance, not even those who clearly have lived a life denying that such a thing as dancing exists. The audience is not expecting this moment and suddenly they find themselves awkwardly dancing to a song they have never heard before, adrenaline at full blast, possibly thinking this is a good opportunity to let go and enjoy the moment, but also possibly failing to fully do so. This dance break makes something very clear: Aguirre is not only sharing her story with us, she is also making us share in her vulnerability. This bold invitation to dance (an invitation that only "up north" would be regarded as bold) is a reminder that personal history lives in our bodies, and as such, it can be transmitted through culturally rich embodied practices such as salsa dancing. The fluidity of dance, mirrored by the rhythm of Aguirre's narrative, attests to our condition as unfixed, transformable beings, made up of mobile bodies and ever-changing stories that are ours to mold, frame, and retell as we desire.

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The author saw Carmen Aguirre's *Blue Box* on May 2, 2012, at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre, produced by Toronto's Nightswimming Theatre in collaboration with Vancouver's Neworld Theatre, and directed by Brian Quint.

NOTE

1 Susan Bennett refers to the autobiographical performing body as archive—as a "literal vessel of a somatic history" (35).

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Assimilating Shakespeare in the National Arts Centre's Algonquin *King Lear*

BY KATHRYN PRINCE

© Andree Lanthier / Kevin Loring and Monique Mojica in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the National Arts Centre.

The Algonquin *King Lear* at Ottawa's National Arts Centre was a project nearly half a century in the making, and the perfect swan song for Peter Hinton, whose seven-year term as artistic director of the NAC's English Theatre is as memorable for his frequent Shakespeare productions as for his often-stated determination to make the NAC a truly national theatre reflecting Canada in all its diversity. As has been the case with many of Hinton's productions here, the actual achievement fell a little short of his often over-reaching ambition, but this *King Lear* remains a landmark in Canadian theatre history nonetheless, and it was a privilege to have witnessed its opening night.

Hinton has been determined to shine the NAC's spotlight on performers and plays from across Canada, and Canada's First Nations and Métis have certainly been included in this wide-angle vision, often through co-productions with First Nations theatre companies. Métis playwright Marie Clements's *Copper Thunderbird* (co-produced with urban ink) capped off his first season in 2007, followed by *The Death of a Chief* (Yvette Nolan and Kennedy Cathy MacKinnon's adaptation of *Julius Caesar*, co-produced with Native Earth Performing Arts) in 2008, then the NAC's fortieth anniversary production of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* in 2009 (co-produced with Western Canada Theatre Company) and Kevin Loring's Governor General's Award-winning *Where the Blood Mixes* in 2010 (co-produced by the Vancouver Playhouse and Belfry Theatre in association with The Savage Society). *King Lear* was a reunion of NAC alumni from these productions in a cast fully composed of Aboriginal actors. For Jani Lauzon, who played Cordelia and the Fool, the production had a particular symbolic value: "We reclaimed the territory by placing our footsteps in the halls of the NAC."[1] The issues of territory, land claims, appropriation, and the value of symbols were central to the production's interpretation of Shakespeare's play.

The genesis of this particular dream goes back to 1967, when August Schellenberg first began to contemplate an all-Aboriginal *Lear* after a conversation with another future Canadian icon, John Juliani, at the Vancouver Playhouse's première of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, in which Schellenberg played the title character's compelling tragic foil, Jaimie Paul.

One of Schellenberg's aspirations, to prove that Canada possesses a full cast's worth of Aboriginal actors capable of performing Shakespeare, was somewhat undermined by Hinton's decision to favour a conversational diction perceptibly inflected by the natural accents of some of the actors, eschewing the rhythm of Shakespeare's blank verse for the patterns of everyday speech. To be sure, much of the play is in prose, and there is no reason why actors at the National Arts Centre should sound anything like those at the Royal Shakespeare Company, but a modern-sounding pan-Canadian register was authentic to neither the play's rhythms nor the production's seventeenth-century setting; had the production been set in present-day Canada there would have been no reason to question this choice. Drawing on the considerable talents of actors famous mainly for their television and film roles in many cases, this production sounded at times more like an episode of *Corner Gas* or the *Royal Canadian Air Farce* than a Shakespeare play, even though the actors were using Shakespeare's text virtually intact, albeit in a patchwork version that amalgamated lines from the variant texts. The issue of a stable, authentic text for *King Lear* is a vexed one in Shakespeare studies, sidestepped in this production by picking and choosing among all of the available options. The actors' keen sense of comic timing made this a much funnier *King Lear* than I have ever encountered, so Hinton did reap some advantages from his approach, but at the cost of the gravitas and grandeur necessary to generate the play's devastating tragedy.

The decision not to revise the text to fit its altered setting led to some odd dissonances that, for me, had the Brechtian effect of reminding me that, whatever I might be seeing on stage, this was most definitely not a play about seventeenth-century Canada. Hinton's initial stated intention to set the production at the time of the play's first known performance, 1608, seems to have been revised: later press releases refer more vaguely to the seventeenth century, a period that encompasses the establishment of the first permanent French settlement (at Port-Royal in 1605), the founding of the Hudson's Bay Company (in 1670), a series of skirmishes and treaties between the French and English over the right to exploit Canada's natural resources, and first contact leading to, among other things, the small pox epidemics that would decimate First Nations populations and weaken their resistance to the colonizing Europeans.

A few well-placed visual clues—Edmund's sword, the Fool's Union Jack loincloth—indicated that for Lear and his people this first contact had already occurred. Less clearly signalled was the insidious effect of that contact, though it was implicit in the trajectory of that "half-blooded fellow," Edmund, thus subtly underpinning the tragic action to which Edmund's villainy contributes. Kevin Loring's Edmund was in many ways the focal point of this production, not least because Loring is the strongest Shakespearean actor in the cast. From a few shreds and patches in the script, Loring developed an interesting backstory for his character as a Métis, the embodiment of the contact between European and Aboriginal culture that ran through as a nearly invisible undercurrent of the production as a whole. Edmund's Algonquin father (Billy Merasty's Gloucester) may have told him about the Great Bear in the sky, but, in one of the production's few rephrasings of Shakespeare's text, it was Edmund's mother who called it Ursa Major. With this slight alteration, Loring evoked a mother who knew the Latin names of constellations and taught them to her son. Where had Edmund been during his nine years' absence from Lear's court? His attire provides the answer. Dressed in slightly threadbare European-styled clothing in a world of buckskin and beads, brandishing the play's only sword against the other characters' daggers and arrows, Edmund is the representative of a dangerous culture of individualism that ultimately destroys him and, nearly, the community that has never really embraced him as one of its own: his mother's culture threatens his father's. Fittingly, he is killed not with a dagger or an arrow, but with his own sword wielded against him.

Loring's evocative alteration of a pronoun was one of very few textual alterations in a production that more often favoured resonant dissonances between the Shakespearean text and the production's fictional world. There was a Brechtian effect, a momentary distantiation, when, for example, the visual evidence showed that the contenders for Cordelia's hand clearly belong to the royal families of Canada's First Nations while in the dialogue Lear repeatedly refers to them as "Burgundy" and "France," or when, despite the dialogue's obsession with Dover, the dénouement unfolds oceans and continents away from its fabled white cliffs. For Lear, the ability to see the world for what it is, the "thing itself" rather than the language in which he dresses it with his regal pronouncements, is gained over the course of his tragic journey; these resonant dissonances underscored a thematic element of the play. Other juxtapositions between text and performance had nothing to do with the Algonquin setting and were, to me, distancing without generating a concomitant moment of insight: Gloucester did not have a white beard for his tormentors to pluck, but he and Regan still pointlessly exchanged lines about it as she snatched a glossy black hair from his head, and Lear seemed more deluded than ever when he referred to the soft voice of Jani Lauzon's unremittingly bellowing Cordelia. What the text told us and what the production showed us were often left to labour at cross-purposes, sometimes generating insight, but often not.

More's the pity, because Gillian Gallow designed a visually stunning set rising from the cross-section of an ancient tree, its massive rings at times suggesting rippling water or the muddy shore, invoking notions of geological time, ecology, and the connections between human habitation and nature. Complementing this set, Louise Guinand's lighting design drawn from sun, moon, fire, and storm, together with the soundscape created by Alessandro Juliani (John Juliani's son), comprising chirps and creaks of the natural world and the whoops and hollers of Lear's people, created a dramatic world that fulfilled the NAC's publicity blurb about a production "as big as Canada."[2] The design of this production was an elegy for the Canadian landscape, and for the Algonquin nation that, in the play's opening scene, remained intact and glorious. We were witnessing the disintegration not of Lear's Britain but of our own history. That "our" is, I think, a crucial aspect of this production, potentially erasing the distinction between the characters on stage and the forces of colonialism and conquest that resulted, ultimately, in the founding of Canada on the land that, in this production, is Lear's to lose. There is something ideologically troubling about mapping the conquest of the Algonquin nation onto Shakespeare's glorification of Brittania united, as though present-day Canada were a consensual union of nations comparable to the United Kingdom. Could Scotland's independence referendum happen in a Canadian context, with individual First Nations voting whether or not to secede from the Canadian confederation?

That troubling doubt was emphasized, on opening night, by the remarks of Chief Gilbert Whiteduck of Kitigan Zibi

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Anishinabeg First Nation in Quebec, who welcomed the audience and reminded us that geographically Ottawa falls within the Algonquin nation and is part of an unresolved land claim. The negotiations affecting the national capital seemed close to a resolution earlier this year, complicated by disputes between status and non-status Algonquins, and by the current division of the historic Algonquin territory between Ontario and Quebec. As Chief Whiteduck's remarks suggested, the division of the kingdoms being depicted that night was not only about ancient Britons, Shakespeare's England, or the seventeenth-century "Canada" in which Hinton's production was set. Academics sometimes suggest that *King Lear* was a clever compliment to King James, whose project to unite the kingdoms was endorsed by Shakespeare's depiction of the disastrous consequences ensuing from Lear's decision to sunder them. In this context, and that of Chief Whiteduck's comments, this production can be understood as Hinton's nation-building legacy of sorts, his final plea for an inclusive but also to some extent assimilationist Canadian theatre culture.

Canada, in this production, was unaffected by the human drama playing out across its vast landscape. The epic, evocative natural world dwarfed August Schellenberg, a smaller-than-life Lear, all too convincing as a pitiful old man strutting and fretting his way to oblivion: less a tragic fall than a one-note lament in the key of whine. That querulousness is part of Lear's journey, to be sure, but its pervasiveness in Schellenberg's performance, along with the number of muttered and muffed lines on opening night, suggests that this impression of a Lear who from the outset is already too weak to hold his kingdom together was not wholly a deliberate performance choice. Peter Hinton is too experienced a Shakespearean director to have made the fundamental error of plotting a trajectory that gives Lear nowhere to go. Whether Schellenberg was overcome by the long-anticipated realization of a dream that John Juliani had not lived to witness, or overwhelmed by the contemporary resonances highlighted by Chief Whiteduck, or whether at 75 he had simply been made to outwait his capacity to do justice to the role, this was an underwhelming performance from one of Canada's most accomplished actors, who had been considerably more compelling as a patriarch in the NAC's 2009 *Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. I writhed in sympathetic agony when, as he struggled to survive what should have been his moment of triumph, he lived rather than performed Lear's painful humiliation. The struggle towards the "promised end" was as much Schellenberg's race to the finish as it was Lear's journey to the end of his suffering, and pity for the actor, not catharsis from the character's tragic fall, was the inevitable result. I was glad to hear that Schellenberg's performance was word-perfect later in the run.

Another false note was struck by Jani Lauzon, much the least interesting of Lear's three daughters as a consistently strident Cordelia, an effect exacerbated by the decision not to include the asides that, in the opening scene, add a sympathetic dimension to her rather sanctimonious refusal to comply with her father's desire to hear her express her love in words. Lauzon doubled as a manic Trickster-cum-Fool to better effect, her pointy-eared hat suggesting the mythic figure of Coyote. Lauzon's perfect comic delivery was frequently rewarded with audience laughter, though the analogy between the Aboriginal Trickster and the Shakespearean Fool was misleading: unlike Coyote, the Fool has no agency in this play, commenting mischievously rather than actively creating mischief. Edmund, not the Fool, is the real Trickster in this play.

In the power struggle created by Lear's abdication, and the emotional vacuum resulting from Schellenberg's pocket-sized Lear and Lauzon's apparently intentionally unsympathetic Cordelia, Gordon Patrick White's Edgar and Kevin Loring's Edmund quickly emerged as the play's two opposing, and only truly appealing, figures. Perhaps I was not the only audience member who felt short-changed not to hear Loring speak that most egotistical and poignant response to the death of the two sisters who have died competing for his affection, "Yet Edmund was beloved." Like Cordelia's asides, this line was excluded, diminishing the emotional pull that these two characters often exert in performance.

Edmund was nonetheless a powerful and compelling personality, exerting a powerful and ultimately deadly force of attraction on Tantoo Cardinal's Regan and Monique Mojica's Goneril, whose performances as Lear's love-starved, power-hungry daughters gained an interesting subtext as moving depictions of women whose intelligence, strength, and passion have become disfigured through circumstances that have denied them an outlet. Cardinal suggested, in an interview, that she understood this as a consequence of cultural contamination: "Colonialism has flipped the turtle on its back, and things don't sit right. […] People do crazy things—there's fear and abuse—when things are out of balance."[3] Faced with the chance to flourish, and with a man who is their equal, who could blame them for pursuing power and Edmund? Loring has thrived at the NAC, and I would not be surprised to see him playing Lear one day, though I think he would make a captivating Hamlet and a compelling Macbeth first. It is perhaps fitting, or telling, that it was Loring who brought Hinton and dramaturge Paula Danckert a Manga (or comic book) version of *King Lear* in 2009: if the dream for this production was Schellenberg's and Juliani's to begin with, it became Loring's project too, and as the NAC's writer-in-residence and a member of the NAC's company that season, he was well positioned to exert some subtle, sustained pressure there. The fact that this production has become his showcase seems to be no accident—or perhaps his Edmund was so convincing that I see Machiavellian motives where none exist.

The Manga version of *King Lear* may have proved to Hinton and Danckert that an Aboriginal setting could make sense, as Loring suggests in a blog entry,[4] but this production is no comic book reduction. The Manga's very approximate

sense of "Mohican" culture is mitigated, here, by a substantial investment in authenticity, not least through the involvement of a large number of Aboriginal performers. This includes not only the thirteen named cast members, but also the twenty-six supernumeraries from Four Nations Exchange who participated in theatre workshops at the NAC incorporating traditional Anishinaabeg teachings. Like Grigori Kozintsev's 1971 film version of *King Lear*, which uses wide-angle shots of extras to illustrate the larger consequences of Lear's choices while his society implodes around him, the presence of the Four Nations Exchange actors reminds the audience that the tragedy of this play is not, or at least not solely, Lear's personal one. Perhaps there was something a trifle suspect, ideologically, about using these amateur performers as a human pageant of Aboriginality, part of the Algonquin landscape scenery. Nonetheless, by setting Lear's tragic fall within a visibly present community poised on the brink of upheaval, a community for whom France is not a generous saviour led by Cordelia but a conqueror and a contaminant, that tragedy is all the more poignant.

Ultimately the success of this production will be measured not by reviews or box-office takings but, given its stated intentions, by the subsequent careers of its cast members and by the casting of these and other Aboriginal actors in roles not specifically designated as Aboriginals: the kind of colour-blind casting that is already a generation old and largely taken for granted at the UK's Royal Shakespeare Company and National Theatre. I'm not sure that the most talented of them needed an all-Aboriginal Shakespeare production to prove themselves capable of the performances that they delivered, especially as some are already award-winning actors: perhaps it is fair to say that this is an argument that was always oriented towards prospective producers, not actors and audiences, and therefore one that became moot as soon as the NAC put its weight behind the production. However, like other productions of Shakespeare that have made race an issue (Patrick Stewart as the title character in a "photo-negative" *Othello*, John Light as an Inuit Caliban in Rupert Goold's Arctic *Tempest*), this *King Lear* achieved an impact that outstrips its accomplishments as a theatrical event. Schellenberg did not need to triumph as Lear in order to secure his place in posterity, but his dream of an all-Aboriginal production was never about individual glory. As a collective achievement, one in which the entire creative team is included alongside the actors and extras, it is most definitely a landmark production.

© Andree Lanthier
Billy Merasty and Kevin Loring in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* at the National Arts Centre.

NOTES

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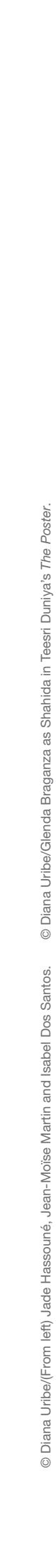
CULTURAL NARRATIVES IN THEATRE: *L'Affiche* AND ITS ENGLISH COUNTERPART, *The Poster*

BY ELEANOR FOULKES


© Diana Uribe/(From left) Jade Hassouné, Jean-Moïse Martin and Isabel Dos Santos. © Diana Uribe/Glenda Braganza as Shahida in Teesri Duniya's *The Poster*.

The stage is dark and strewn with clothes. The actors walk onto the stage, put on their costumes and their characters, line up before the audience, and pass along a martyr poster.[1] Thus begins Teesri Duniya's English premiere of *The Poster* (*L'Affiche*) in Montreal, written by Philippe Ducros, translated by Shelley Tepperman, and directed by Arianna Bardesono. The play, set in present day Palestine and Israel, begins with the death of two children and the imprisonment of another. The rest of the story focuses on these deaths. While building a play around the theme of loss is not exceptional, Ducros's emphasis is on how these losses have become a part of the daily life of the inhabitants: "They live with their dead," says the Israeli soldier Itzhak to his wife Sarah, trying to explain the suffering he sees, and inflicts, every day. The story is thus anchored in suffering, and throughout the two-hour play we see the characters attempt to come to terms with the burden of repetitious loss in whatever way they can. A few try to escape from the shadow of the past and create a new reality. But all attempts at closure and renewal are viciously dashed.

During the same month as the Teesri production, Ducros's play was mounted in French at Espace Libre, directed by Ducros himself. Thus, in an uncommon occurrence in Montreal theatre, both the English premiere and a French production were running at the same time. These two productions clearly illustrate how the varying narratives told by different productions of the same play reveal the societies that they describe and (perhaps more importantly) that describe them. They offer an exciting opportunity to not only observe how the Middle East is represented by a Western author, but to compare how two productions with different social aims used the same source material to create distinct representations of the Middle East. Examining the diverging and converging narratives within the play, as well as the competing narratives offered by each production, I will argue that while the narratives differ due to a difference in focus by the theatre companies, Ducros's larger message endures: When all is said and done, there is an occupier and there is an occupied.

Before I turn to look at the play itself, however, I must underline some of the premises that I, as a student of Middle East Studies, will be operating under. One of the main ideas of this field is that societies are constructed; and these constructions are largely based on understandings of "the Other" (Said, *Orientalism*). Our understanding of our own and other societies depends greatly on cultural

narratives: How do we tell ourselves? How do we tell the "Other"? Nowhere is an understanding of cultural narratives more vital than in Middle Eastern conflict zones—particularly that of the Arabs and Israelis. The lens through which Westerners are taught to understand and represent the Middle East is, in general, so warped that we must carefully examine any Western depiction of it, because "Othering" can very easily occur unbeknownst to the most aware of authors.

The play *L'Affiche* (or *The Poster*) is in many ways a fictionalized retelling of Philippe Ducros's *Les Lançeurs de Pierres*, a reflective travelogue chronicling Ducros's experiences in Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon (in refugee camps) in the early 2000s.

© Frederico Ciminari / The cast of Philippe Ducros's *L'Affiche*.

The French production at Espace Libre, which was directed by Ducros, thus gives us a version of the play as close to the writer's intentions as possible. Although the French version of play had been performed before, Teesri Duniya's *The Poster* was the English-language premiere of the play. However, as we shall see, language is not the only differentiating factor between these two productions: far more important are the diverging social aims of the two companies.

Both of these companies emphasize producing socially oriented plays. Teesri Duniya urges cross-cultural dialogue, embracing works that facilitate such an exchange, and in this way encourages communal growth. Indeed, the company organized several panels on the subject of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Q&As between the actors and the audiences after several performances. Espace Libre's mandate, on the other hand, is to produce challenging theatre—both aesthetically and in terms of content.[2] The company aims to extend the boundaries of theatre and push audiences into uncomfortable positions. Ducros, who is also the artistic director of Espace Libre, titled his (artistic) director's note "Résistance," and in it he discusses theatre as a vehicle in the mechanics of social dissent in Western society. The contrasting mandates of these two companies, then, led to quite distinct narratives.

In Ducros's production, the violence and anger are heightened. Tires, used as paintings, produce the sound effects of explosions, and guns are represented by megaphones, suggesting Israeli propaganda and the violence of words. The language in the French version is much more biting, due in part to the elevated style of the author—who, by using expressive and visceral language rather than realistic dialogue, gives voice to how people *feel*. Ducros's production, as a result, is overwhelming. It submerges us in a tsunami of violence and hate—perhaps mimicking the feelings aroused in a sympathetic visitor to the region—leaving the audience distressed and out of breath.

By contrast, Teesri Duniya presents us with a narrative of pain and loss, a difference in tone that may in part be due to the play's translation. The English mounting of the play gives us much more room to breathe, and thus more time to reflect on and empathize with the suffering of the individuals. Whereas Ducros's production aims to wake people up to the atrocities of occupation and give voice to those who are silenced (Ducros, "Public Notice"), the Teesri production seems to assume that people know what's going on in the Middle East but don't spend enough time thinking about it.

A further difference can be seen in how the characters are portrayed: particularly Itzhak and Ismael. Itzhak is a young Israeli in mandatory military service in the occupied territories struggling with the shade of the man he killed: "They are on the front line of a machine of oppression needed by the occupation, surrounded by enemies feasting on the resentment this occupation gives rise to" (Ducros, "Public Notice" 12). François Bernier's Itzhak in the Espace Libre production is angry and exhibits extreme symptoms of PTSD: twitching, shrieking, and abusing his wife. By contrast, Davide Chiazzese's Itzhak in the Teesri production is much more lucid, desperately trying to understand his actions and come to terms with them. This likeability may make his actions at the checkpoints seem inconsistent, but one could argue that the inconsistency of his character is a more realistic portrayal of the difficult alliance between the roles of soldier and citizen: the soldier is encouraged to kill and act on impulse, the citizen to reflect and show compassion.

The character of Ismael—the younger brother of Saïd, a captive of the Israeli army, and the sweetheart of the dead martyr Salem's sister Shahida—also reflects differences in the two productions. Under

Bardesono's direction at Teesri, Ismael, played by Jade Hassouné, is a kid who has suffered great loss trying to get out of a desperate situation. His claim that he is "not political" seems sincere; he just wants to be a painter and make a better life for himself and his family. The failure of his relationship with Shahida and the death of his hopes of leaving Palestine are all the more tragic because of this hopeful naïveté. He is the everyman destroyed by society and war. Hassouné's moving and even-handed performance evokes the anger, suffering, desperation, and burning hope of the character—hope that the audience shares—which is dashed by the end of the play. Étienne Pilon's Ismael in Ducros's production, on the other hand, brings to mind a young *soixante-huitard*—protesting and arrested, throwing rocks at the walls, raging against the system. Pilon is a much older actor than Hassouné and thus does not possess the same childish innocence. This much more disillusioned and angry character almost hits Shahida when she rejects him, and the underlying insolence in his dealings with the militia is not present in the English production.

This difference in characterization is reflected in the plays' divergent cultural narratives, which emphasize different aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Just as Itzhak and Ismael are more violent and agitated in the French production, the cultural narrative that *L'Affiche* presents us with is one of destruction and rage. On the other hand, the more empathetic characters of Ismael and Itzhak in *The Poster* indicate the emphasis of this narrative on pain and despair. This pattern of opposition is, interestingly, present not only in the two productions, but in the play itself. Each character has a counterpart that holds either an opposing view or the same view but from the other side of the conflict.

Oum Salem, the dead martyr's mother, is a Palestinian who sees herself perpetually victimized by the subhuman Israelis. Abu Salem, in contrast to his wife, is a father who has lost his son, and, while he sees the Israeli state as oppressive, he does not extend that qualification to all Israelis. He sees his loss as a human one, whereas his wife sees her son's death solely in the context of the Israeli occupation. Similarly to Oum Salem, the Barber sees the Israelis as dogs that need to be exterminated. He believes that it is only through this destruction that they can achieve independence. The flip side of this narrative is the rabbi, who sees the Israelis as a people oppressed throughout history that has finally settled in the Holy Land—to which they have a divine right and will fight to the death to keep. The Palestinians in his view are savages with no souls.

As mentioned above, these differences spring from the emotions on which the Teesri and the Espace Libre productions focus—that is, pain and anger, respectively. Anger is harder to relate to than pain. Watching the Espace Libre production, I found myself disengaging from the happenings onstage; the brick wall came up and the emotional connection was lost. The violence, hate, and anger were too much to take in. Although this staggering storm of difficult emotions may have been the author's experience when visiting Palestine, I question whether it is the best approach for broaching the thorny issue of occupation. Indeed, in a 2010 article Ducros wrote for *alt.theatre*, he spoke of breaking the barrier of silence socially imposed in North America on this issue of occupation. This production certainly does that, but to what effect?

The different approaches of these productions can be compared to the different modes of resistance employed by Palestinians throughout this conflict. The Espace Libre production's explosiveness calls to mind the actions of suicide bombers: destructive, loud, demanding attention, impossible to ignore, but alienating. Teesri Duniya's production is more like the peaceful resistance in Palestine: calls for a boycott of Israeli products and a greater awareness of the suffering and pain caused. This latter approach, when translated to the theatrical, is not quite as visceral as the former; it does not shake people into action, but it does make people more apt to listen.

© Frederico Ciminari / The cast of Philippe Ducros's *L'Affiche*.

In spite of the differences in delivery, both productions are based in the same idea: while individuals on both sides suffer, one of these peoples has a country, and the other doesn't. There is an occupier and an occupied. Daily life is more of a trial—in terms of basic services—in Palestine than in Israel. This is Ducros's fundamental message. It does not minimize suffering on either side, but takes into account the power balance at play. The character of Shahida, Salem's sister, is key to understanding this

narrative. An ordinary girl with no natural inclination towards violence, she loses all she holds dear. She feeds upon the oppression of past generations that has been thrust upon her, and then passes its crushing weight onto others (Ducros, "Public Notice"12-13). How does one get to that place where they feel that their best option is to blow themselves up? The play, in both its incarnations, tries to elucidate on this point and should be praised for neither glorifying nor vilifying Shahida for her actions. The play closes with her suicide attack and the audience is left to make their own conclusions.

One could remark that the play's construction must inevitably orient the audience in one direction. However, the extreme characters on both sides are so unforgiving that the audience shies away from such black and white perspectives. Although, the play is more sympathetic to Palestinians, any positive reading of Shahida's actions is dubious—as she kills a central character who, even in Espace Libre's production, is sympathetic. On the other hand, the play fails to show the horrors of suicide bombings in enough detail and lacks positive Israeli characters. Although the mother of the Jewish character Miriam appears to bear witness to the horrors of a bomb that took her daughter's life, she is a fleeting character who seems to function only to fill the afore-mentioned gap. Whereas Ismael, Shahida, Abu Salem, Saïd, and Abu Saïd are all sympathetic Palestinians, Miriam's mother and Itzhak are the only Israeli characters for whom we feel any sympathy.

This brings us to a discussion of power dynamics in representation. Although the narratives presented in the play are slanted towards Palestinians, it is important to remember the disparity in how these cultures are represented in the West. American influence in Western politics and culture has created an imbalance, shifting the sympathies in representation to the Israelis. It is very difficult for politicians to say anything remotely critical of Israel and still be elected, especially in the US. This affects how the subject is dealt with in the media and has a ripple effect throughout society. Therefore, I think it important to commend Ducros for even attempting to address this issue. One could argue that the imbalance in representation in *L'Affiche* is an accurate representation of the actual situation in Palestine and helps to correct the current rampant errors in perception.

The panel discussions on the Arab-Israeli issue that Teesri organized during the play's theatrical run helped me to understand how the audience saw the characters depicted on stage. The people who attended these highlighted the faults or shortcomings they perceived in the production, as well as its merits. And this discourse shed a great deal of light on the narratives people construct for themselves and which are handed down from generation to generation.

Actor Mohsen El-Gharbi raised the idea of killing the father—that one must detach oneself from the narratives of those who came before—claiming that this is necessary for a society to evolve. Indeed, this idea of a heritage that paralyses rather than fosters growth was something frequently brought up in discussion. Panelist Ronit Melo spoke of her distancing herself from what she saw as the common Jewish narrative of victimhood; Jews, she said, often grow up with a sense of predestined victimhood and are thus blindly defensive of Israel. One Syrian audience member argued that Israelis and Palestinians had lived in peace until the Jews massacred the Palestinians and that the conflict would end with the complete annihilation of the Palestinians, or a miracle.

This narrative of the "Other," different ethnic group is extremely destructive and gets in the way of dialogue. Ducros's play only touches on these limited types of view as expressed through such characters as the rabbi and the barber. These illustrate that such extreme beliefs really do exist and cannot be ignored or discounted. Indeed, it is important to note that the narratives in the play are not completely fabricated. A reading of *Les Lanceurs de Pierres* shows that much of the play's dialogue is lifted, at least in essence, from real conversations the author had with Israelis and Palestinians, suggesting that the cultural narratives expressed in the play are not too different from the cultural narratives that have been created by Palestinians and Israelis.

It is clear, given the power structures that govern our world, that not only must Palestinians and Israelis move on from a narrative of "Othering" accompanied by oppression and victimization: the West must as well. Indeed, the power and influence Western countries enjoy in world politics puts the onus on us Westerners to change our perception of "the Other" and encourage others and our governments to do so as well.

However, and as a final note, it seems that as long as the eponymous martyr posters of each nation continue to be passed along, there can be no conclusion to the violence, for these posters are suffused with sorrow and hatred and glorification of violence. One of the vital messages of the play thus seems to be the importance of divesting oneself from the past. The play's very title indicates an understanding of the strength of these narratives of oppression and victimization, as well as of the necessity to move on and seek mutual reconciliation. The second great strength of this play is to remind us that when one nation controls the lives, livelihoods, and food and water supply of another nation, open and equal dialogue is impossible. Any attempt to be neutral places one on the side of the oppressor (Ducros, *Les Lanceurs*). "When one faces oppression, neutrality falls automatically into the oppressor's camp. Not denouncing it, accepts it" (Ducros, "Public Notice" 10).

NOTES

1 Martyr posters are public notices of people in occupied Palestine who have died as a direct result of the occupation, which are illegally posted, by the hundreds, on the walls throughout the cities.

2 Although one should note that Teesri Duniya also has this mandate, it does appear to be more central to Espace Libre's modus operandi.

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Life Under the Golden Rule

Art and art making are barometers of a community's well-being, reflecting the landscapes in which we work and the golden rules by which we're guided—from "He who has the gold can make and change the rules" to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The inner city Downtown Eastside is highly stressed. Land development and rezoning plans are transforming Greater Vancouver into a "world class creative city" of architectural icons, glass towers, condominiums, and 24/7 mega-entertainment casinos. Global marketing has sent home prices into the stratosphere. Certain politicians encourage creative activity to attract investment capital and "improve" neighbourhoods; the pressures to transform artists into "regeneration bulldozers" are real.[1] So is gentrification as a global urban "regeneration" strategy to remake areas into "whole new complexes of recreation, consumption, production and pleasure as well as residence."[2] The recent addition of Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts and Woodwards Redevelopment brought thousands of new residents and office workers into the community virtually overnight. The neighbourhood is transforming under our feet: single room occupancy hotels become student and worker conversions at rents above welfare rates, and shops and services shift into boutiques and up-scale restaurants. Tensions within the community are increasing. Advocates for low income housing and human-scale streetscapes are pitted against advocates for affordable entry level housing or public safety or improved housing standards.

Two years of cut-backs and turmoil have been super-stressing arts organizations. BC's arts funding was always well below other provinces, but in 2009 the BC Arts Council's funding was cut in half. BC Gaming also reduced its contribution to arts, sports, educational, environmental and social services by 50%—and eliminated funding for adult arts and sports.[3]

Intensive lobbying by the BC arts community and a provincial election restored some arts funding. A one-time Olympic Sports and Arts Legacy Fund was re-directed to the BC Arts Council to temporarily maintain its grants budget at a stable level. BC Gaming recently expanded eligibility to include arts and sports for adults. But the size of the "pot" didn't change; there's less available for everybody.

Another side-effect is the shrinking of matching funds from federal programs. Criteria and regulations narrowing eligibility are axing programs and services. Although almost every industry has some kind of subsidy, incentive, or tax break, social services and arts are targeted for cuts. Government funding is being re-directed to prizes and one-time commemorative events. Thankfully, the City of Vancouver has continued its modest but steady support of the arts despite the tough economic climate.

We know that art won't die and artists won't stop making art. William Cleveland, director of the Centre for the Study of Art and Community, reminds us, "Even in the most desperate places, every war zone, prison—art making is pre-eminent, breaking out all over, a matter of survival." But arts infrastructures, years in the making, have been decimated. Organizations struggle to stay afloat. Seasons are reduced, arts projects cancelled, postponed, or shrunk. Artists lose jobs. Political policies influence programming, production values, and the decisions about which artists, images and stories will be supported to represent our culture.

When I'm feeling overwhelmed, I remind myself of the words of my singing teacher Ralph Cole: "If you can deal with the shit in your life you can grow the perfect rose."

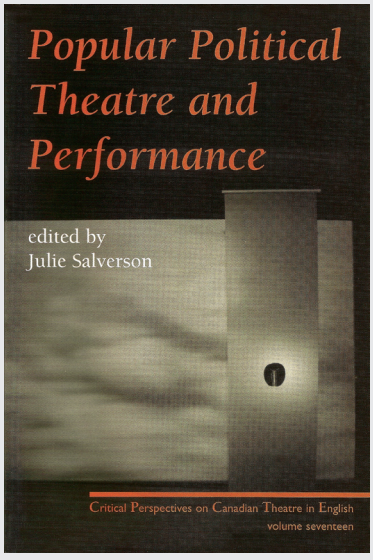
Surfing the tidal wave of cuts, Vancouver Moving Theatre downscaled to concerts, staged readings, and workshop productions. We managed to preserve gaming funding for the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival by framing it as a "neighbourhood-based heritage festival." We joined forces to provide leadership training in community arts (with Toronto's Jumblies Theatre); a Christmas fund-raiser to benefit the festival and community arts (with SFU Woodwards Cultural Programming Unit); and job opportunities for professional and DTES emerging performers (an adaptation of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* with NeWorld Theatre, the PuSh International Performing Arts Festival, and Theatre UBC).

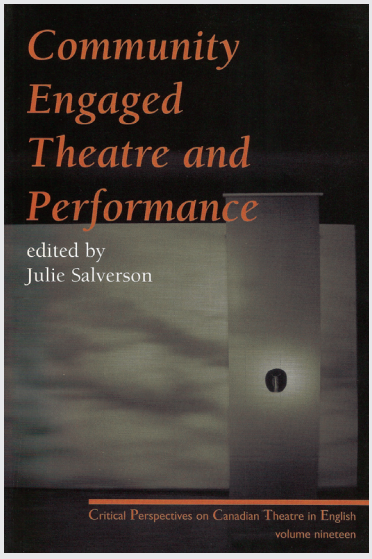
To build healthy communities, all of us are needed. We contribute through art because we're artists, guided by the ethic of reciprocity as we focus on creative projects tailored for and with our community. Alongside other Downtown Eastside artists, activists, businesses, and social organizations, we're striving to nurture local talents and community well-being as we navigate the cultural storms of life.

Savannah Walling

NOTES

1 With thanks to Maggie Hutcheson, "The Community Artist in the Creative City: Engaged Citizen or Regeneration Bulldozer," *Out of Place (dispatches from artists on the loose)* (Jumblies Press, 2010).
2 Neil Smith, "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy," at neil-smith.net.
3 The BC government now takes 90% of all gaming revenues. Treating gaming as a voluntary tax and "cash cow," it's shrunk the portion of gaming allotted to non-profit organizations from 45% to 10%.





Book review

BY ALBERTO GUEVARA

Popular Political Theatre and Performance

ED. JULIE SALVERSON

TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2010. Pp. xii. & 215

Community Engaged Theatre and Performance

ED. JULIE SALVERSON

TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2011. Pp. vi. & 192

Compiling previously published works and newly commissioned ones into two wide-ranging collections, editor Julie Salverson has created two must-read resources for anyone interested in Canadian theatre in general and politically engaged theatre in particular. Salverson does an excellent job of bringing a diverse number of writings, at times very different in purpose and style, together from academic fields such as theatre studies and cultural studies. The volumes also represent diverse Canadian socio-political realities and epochs, with discussions of issues ranging from homelessness, social welfare, immigrant communities' experiences of discrimination, and labour struggles to the challenge of stigma about mental illness, to name just a few.

Gathering the voices of leading scholars and theatre artists in English Canada, these works offer a rare look at the transformative and innovative processes that have animated political popular theatre and performance for more than twenty years. Theatre and performance are presented in these works as interchangeable concepts and interdisciplinary processes that help in illuminating, negotiating, and contesting socio-cultural identities and relations of power within wider socio-cultural contexts. Both *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* and *Community Engaged Theatre and Performance*[1] position theatre front and centre in the desire to influence social change and to connect and engage specific community voices and publics. The relationship between audiences and political theatre and performance that transpired during the late '70s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s is a testament, then, that for political theatre to be of any socio-political consequence it has to be done with and within the community.

In a personal interview in 1998, David Fennario posited,

> Except for waking up certain ideas in the audiences, I haven't been politically successful in mainstream theatre. I think that the best political theatre to be done is with community groups. Things such as cabaret in a café, a bar, a solidarity meeting and the like: humour with very hard politics.

Theatre, in this sense, is a tool of both the theatre workers and their audiences not only for mediating and

articulating alternative ways of seeing the world, but also for creating new ways of organizing the production of socially, culturally, and politically negotiated "realities" through performance. This is a point I was thrilled to see elaborated by a number of authors (such as Chris Brookes 1983 and Baṇuta Rubess 1984) in *Popular...*, and (Alan Filewod 1999 and Edward Little and Richard Paul Knowles 1995) in *Community...*, to name a few.

In my experience with popular theatre—first in Nicaragua during the early 1980s and subsequently here in Canada in Toronto, Montreal, and Lethbridge, and then in Nepal—popular political theatre draws its power to transform society from the community. Whether working with peasant communities in rural Nicaragua, Dalits (untouchables) in Nepal, or the Latin American community in Toronto, the form and content of the community became the form and content of the popular theatre I engaged with: the medium, the message, the space in-between, the grammar, the facilitator, and the language. Again quoting Fennario:

> The arts react to mass movements and communities. Communities happen and the arts catch up with them. Like in Quebec, art was a reflection of the political movements that were happening in the sixties. That has been my experience. The ideas in art always follow the actual reality of people's struggles.

Community and popular theatre involve collective understandings and dialogues that go beyond self. These can be understood as "ideographs." The term "ideographs" is, according to Calvin McGee, " a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a […] normative goal" (15). An "ideograph" has sense only when it means a particular thing to a collective community. Ideographs are very similar to the notion of "social knowledge," which is a type of social grammar to which a particular communicative community (cultural, social, or political) will belong. Thomas Farrell suggests that as a minimum condition for understanding this structure or "social knowledge," it is assumed that people may regularly respond to problems or community issues in similar ways (143).

Throughout these collections, the form and the content in popular and political theatre are explored and presented as a mirror of the public's own social and political preoccupations. As Salverson puts it, "Community engaged theatre throws professional artists together with people who have stories to tell and something to say, and who, just this once (unlike professionals or dedicated amateurs) choose performance as the best way to say it" (*Community...* viii). Closing the gap between play and audience does not only become a politically desirable goal but also a theatrical necessity, creating a powerful communication among and experience for all involved.

This rapprochement between theatre practitioner and community signifies that in the last two decades political theatre in Canada has moved from being just a tool for activism in communities and for communities to fundamentally contributing to the reconstitution of the relationship between theatre and its audiences. This new relationship gestures not only towards a redefinition of theatre in Canada, but also a definition of a more pluralistic concept of community art in the country. As Honor Ford-Smith posits in the chapter "Whose Community? Whose Art? The Politics of Reformulating Community Art":

> The concept of community art currently in use connotes something beyond a gathering of people who come together to make art in a particular social or geographical location, with or without training in the arts. Implicit in the origins of the term is the idea that art production in community contexts is linked to social movements that give voice to the systemically excluded from access to cultural resources, skills, knowledges and institutions. (*Community...* 89)

Salverson, in her introduction to *Popular...*, states, "Popular theatre is, by definition […] a venture that extends the usual multiplicity of roles any show demands and draws on participants from the local recreation centre, the union office, the social service agency, the corner store" (vii). So what then is the significance of this rapprochement of teller and listener in the rhetorical situation for the political theatre and the community at large?

Ruth Howard, in her chapter "The Cultural Equivalent of Daycare Workers?" (*Community...*), asks some very important questions that call attention to this fundamental aspect of political popular theatre and engaged theatre in Canada and beyond. She asks, for example, "What, if any, is the point of connection between the desires and intentions of the artists and the participants? Do they know why we think we are doing it? Do we know why they are doing it? Does it matter if in either case the answer is 'no'? Does it matter if the reasons are different, as long as both are satisfied?" (137). Such a line of questioning evokes a very important turn in the rapprochement between tellers, listeners and theatre workers and their publics and communities at many levels over the last two decades or more. The social, political, and aesthetic influences for such a connection derives from the developments of popular theatre elsewhere, especially in Latin America.

But strong domestic theatrical and political developments have also contributed to this close relationship between audience and theatre workers in Canada. For instance, in Alan Filewod's essay "The Interactive Documentary in Canada: Catalyst Theatre's *It's About Time"* (*Popular...*), he implies that such a relationship has been crucial in the development of popular political theatre in Canada: "In Catalyst's work the interaction of audience and performers is necessary to both the performance and the political function of the play" (25). But why does this interaction become crucial?

Augusto Boal has stated, "Some of us 'make' theatre—all of us 'are' theatre. What kind of theatre? The theatre which is, in its most archaic sense, our capacity to observe ourselves in action" (*Legislative Theatre* 5). This retrospectiveness and reflexivity, in my view, are the first steps in creating knowledge about one's position in a social structure of power relations. Observing ourselves in action creates a rhetorical *situation* that blurs the boundaries between audience (community) and performer. According to Farrell,

> If a situation is considered 'rhetorical' (in Bitzer's terminology) at least two factors must be present: (1) the

> outcome of the situation must be indeterminate, i.e., it must always be possible for the audience to refrain from acting in the recommended manner; and (2) the exigence of a situation must be amenable to resolution by an audience's action. (145)

As Eugene Garver states, "[W]e make judgments about speakers, and are persuaded by them" (23).

Rhetoric can facilitate seeing different sides of an argument, and thereby audience and speaker can recognise the real state of things in a communicative community. People think very well of texts, written and visual, that reflect the audience's character. In this case, the communality among audience and performer is their shared social reality and interest in a social problem. Thus as Catherine Graham, in "On the Political Importance of the Aesthetic" (*Popular...*) suggests, "The role of the artist in such a theatre is no longer that of speaking for a non-public, but of building a counter–public that focuses attention on and contests the mechanisms of its own exclusion from major social debates" (147).

Chris Brookes, in "Seize the Day: The Mummers' Gros Mourn" (*Popular...)*, posits very similar ideas about the inclusionary power of theatre. His reference here is to the use of theatre for social animation in a community facing elimination from an area of Newfoundland that local residents have always called home, which is slated to become a federal park. "The play has clarified the Sally's Cove reality in a powerful way: it has given people a 'handle' on it. Like any work of art, our show represents a way of seeing. And like any work of art, it is not neutral; it does not simply 'uplift people'"(9).

Fundamentally, then, the stories that take centre stage in these volumes are, in Salverson's words, "stories that don't get told in most of the places Canadians go for entertainment or refuge—theatres, television, concert halls, galleries, cinemas"(*Community...*, x). The chronological arrangement of both books gives readers the opportunity to engage with, or at least to appreciate, the evolution of and the influences that have permeated popular and political theatre in Canada. Even though both volumes are meant to be looked at in tandem, I think that this need not be so. Certainly these volumes can appeal to similar audiences, but they can very well be of interest to specific audiences too. Whether reading them apart or together, those who enter the world of these compilations will enter a world rich in stories and images of Canada of the late 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

NOTE

1 Hereafter, these volumes will be referred to as *Popular...* and *Community...*, respectively.

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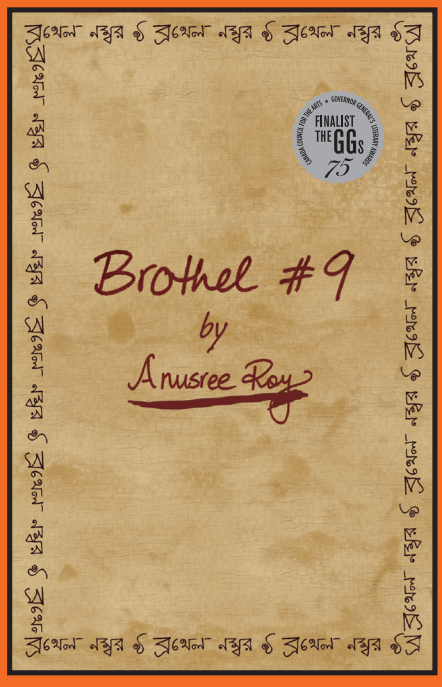

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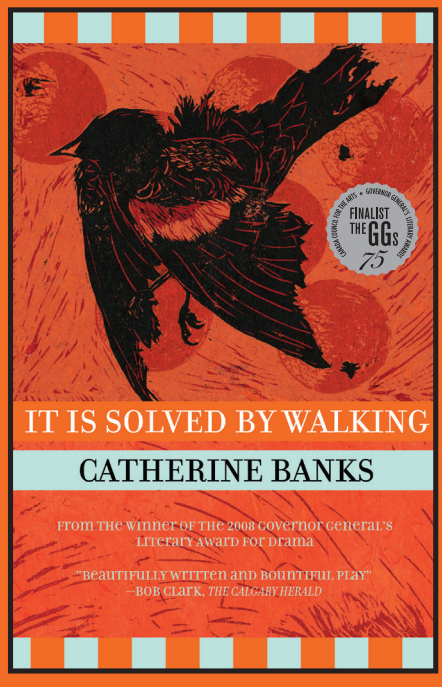

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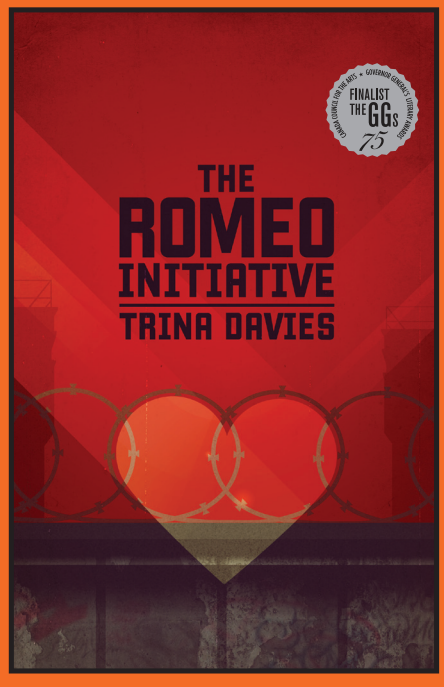

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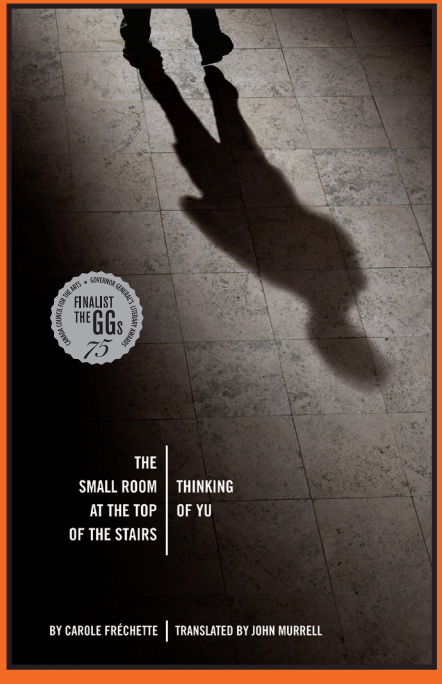

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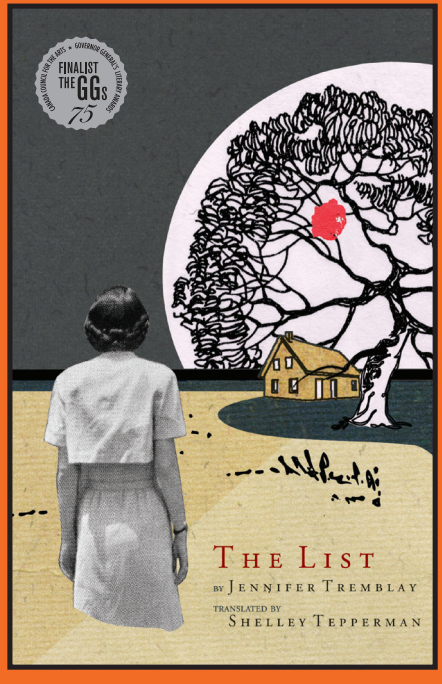

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