# GENDER & THEATRE AT THE MARGINS

JENN GRIFFIN

J. PAUL HALFERTY

ANGELA M. MEYER (PONY)

TAWIAH BEN M'CARTHY

MARJAN (SZ) MOOSAVI

MARILYN NORRY

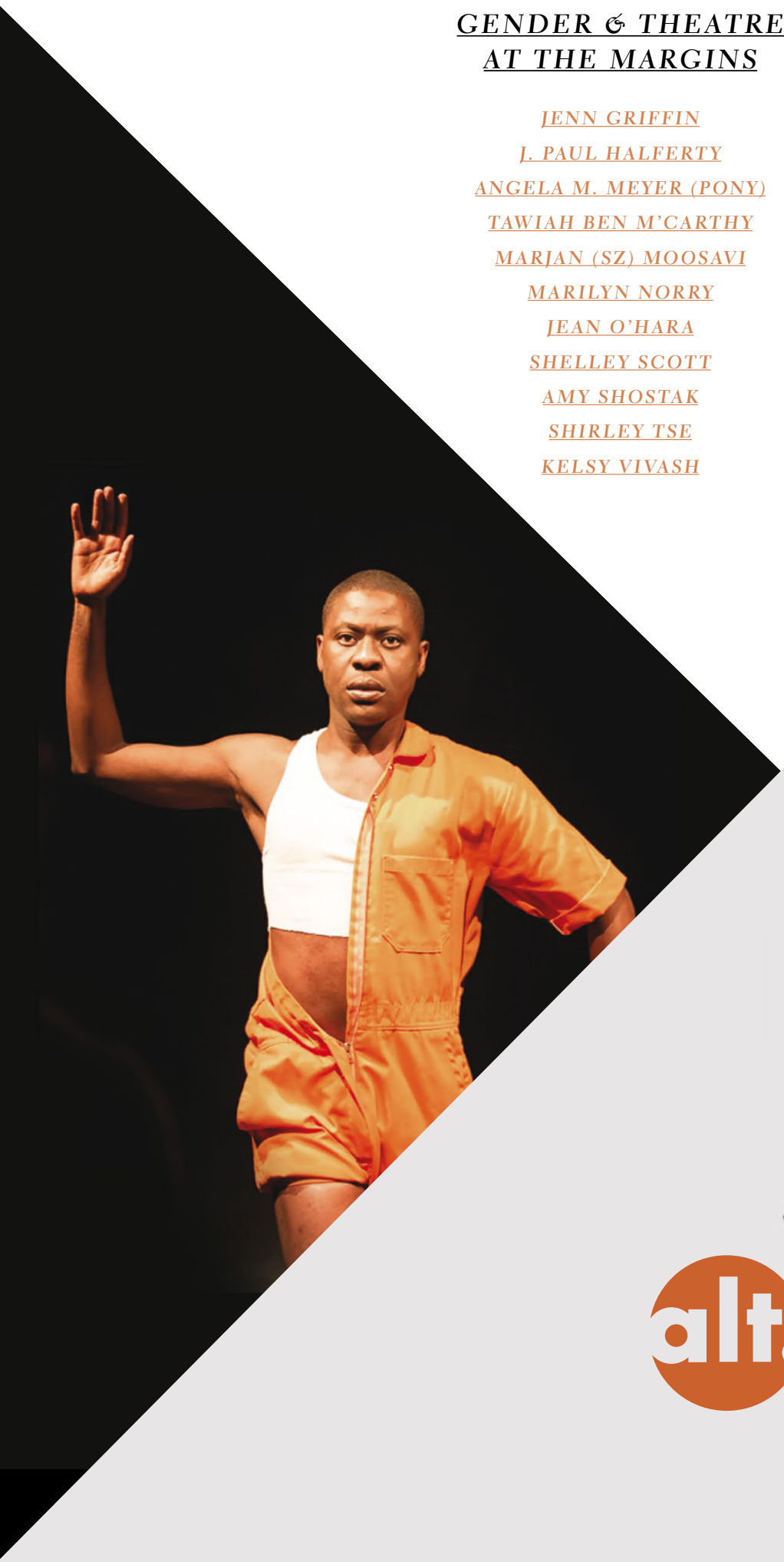
JEAN O'HARA

SHELLEY SCOTT

AMY SHOSTAK

SHIRLEY TSE

KELSY VIVASH



alt theatre
cultural diversity and the stage

Vol. 10 No. 3
SPRING 2013 $6

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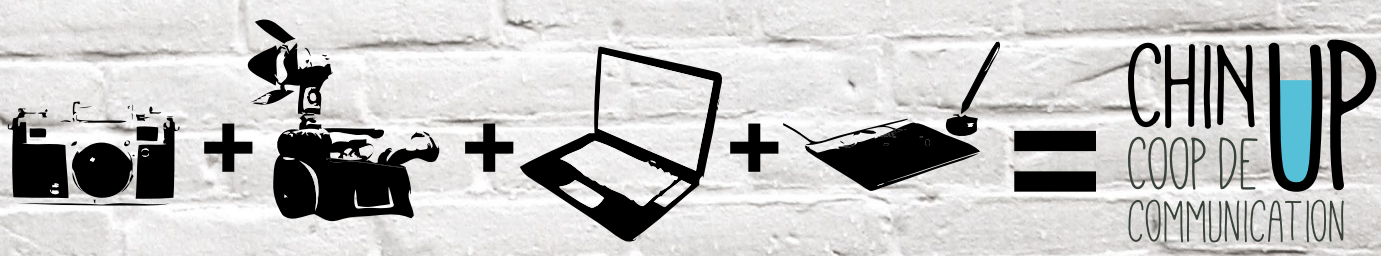


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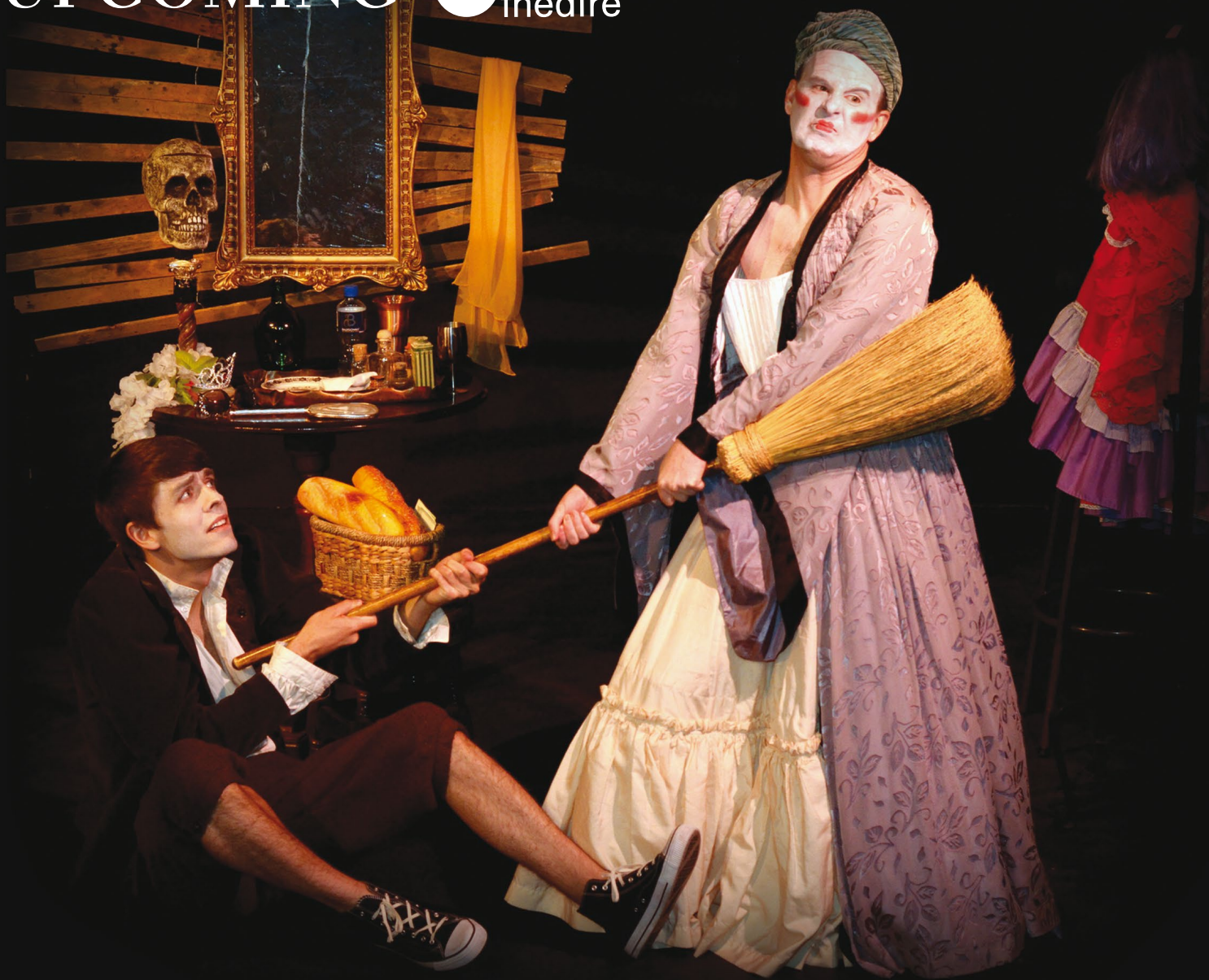

## 10.4 Summer 2013

**ARTICLE** JAY WHITEHEAD reflects on the International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival and the state of Canadian queer theatre on international and intercultural stages. **INTERVIEW** CHRISTINE COMEAU talks to playwright SUZANNE LEBEAU about violence, education, and creating theatre about the global South from the global North. **DISPATCH** ANNIE SMITH discusses the Grand Prairie Community Play project. **BOOK REVIEW** KATHERINE ZIEN reviews *Estudios avanzados de performance*, by MARCELA FUENTES and DIANA TAYLOR.

alt.theatre
cultural diversity and the stage
Vol. 10 No.3

***alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*** is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

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Founded in 1998, ***alt.theatre*** is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre–an intercultural theatre company with a mandate to produce socially engaged theatre that reflects Canada's social and cultural diversity. ***alt.theatre*** is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography.

Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales Du Québéc/Library and Archives Canada ISSN 1481-0506

**For more information, contact *alt.theatre* magazine at Teesri Duniya Theatre**
460 St-Catherine W., Suite 916
Montreal QC H3B 1A7
Tel. 514 848-0238
**email: info@alttheatre.ca**
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COVER PHOTOS
**© Jeremy Mimnagh.**
**Image of creator/performer Tawiah M'Carthy in *Obaaberima*, directed by Evalyn Parry at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.**
**© SHOWStudio.com and Millie Brown.**
**Image of performance artist Millie Brown in *Nexus Vomitus*.**



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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested $20.1 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada.

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# *CONTRIBUTORS*

## EDITORIAL

### *NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH*

is an artist, activist, researcher, and the editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre*. She recently completed an MFA in Community-based Theatre at the University of Alberta, where her research explored decolonial practices of theatre creation. Nikki is originally from Toronto, but her life, work, and studies have taken her across Canada and the world. She currently works as director, actor, improviser, facilitator, and teacher in Edmonton.

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## ARTICLES

### *MARJAN (SZ) MOOSAVI*

recently received an MA in Theatre Studies from York University and is doing a PhD in the same field at University of Toronto. A former Fulbright Scholar, she won the Iranian Women's Theatre award for research on gender dynamics in plays by Iranian women playwrights. Her major research interests involve intersections of theatre and cultural/political identity. Her current studies move between theory and praxis of the Iranian state's interventionist power in conditioning theatrical practice and the resistance it evokes among theatre practitioners.

Memoir of Tehran: page 10

### *ANGELA M. MEYER (PONY)*

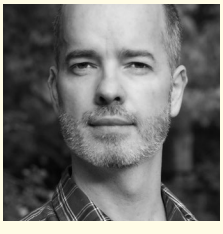
is a native Kentuckian now living and studying at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. Angela's current PhD research focuses on drag king culture, community, and performance. Angela is interested in audience/community experiences in purposefully queer(ed) spaces as well as what happens when you take drag into public spaces.

Drag Kinging with Ben&Pony: page 14

### *SHIRLEY TSE*

is a professional photographer based out of Edmonton, Alberta. She specializes in lifestyle, culture, and event portraiture, and has been obsessed with documenting the life around her since being given her dad's 50mm film camera to play with when she was ten years old. Her photographs have been published in the *Edmonton Journal*, *Exposure Queer Arts & Culture Festival*, *Gay Calgary Magazine*, and *Exclaim Music Magazine*. You can view more of her work at www.girlnamedshirl.com.

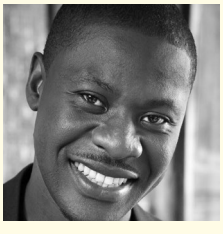
Drag Kinging with Ben&Pony: page 14



### *J. PAUL HALFERTY*

is currently completing his PhD dissertation on queer Canadian theatre at Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. His work has been published in *Theatre Research in Canada*, *Canadian Theatre Review*, and the anthology *Queer Theatre in Canada* (Playwrights Canada Press). He is associate editor of *TRANS(per)FORMING Nina Arsenault: An Unreasonable Body of Work* (Intellect Press), and served as president of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre's board of directors from 2008 to 2012.

An Intercultural "Outdooring": page 20



### *TAWIAH BEN M'CARTHY*

is a Ghanaian-born theatre artist, based in Toronto. He is the creator/playwright/performer of *The Kente Cloth* (Summerworks 2008) and *Obaaberima*, a multidisciplinary/intercultural solo-show developed in residency at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. Tawiah trained as an actor at York University. His professional acting/creator credits include, Bernard in *The Boys in the Band* (Ghostlight Projects), Private Nolan in *The Fort At York* (Crate Productions), and Ato in *Body 13* (MTSpace). He was a director with TheNextEdition (2010-2012).

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***SHELLEY SCOTT***
is an associate professor in the University of Lethbridge's Department of Theatre and Dramatic Arts, where she teaches Canadian Theatre and directs. Shelley is the past president of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research. She has published *The Violent Woman as a New Theatrical Character Type: Cases from Canadian Drama* (Edwin Mellen, 2007) and *Nightwood Theatre: A Woman's Work Is Always Done* (Athabasca, 2010), and is currently guest editing, with Reid Gilbert, an issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* on burlesque.

Talking to Each Other: page 23

***KELSY VIVASH***
is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto's Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies. Her current research focuses on the secretions and excretions of the body as related to subjectivity and presented within the performative frame. She presented at the Theatre and Performance Research Association's conference in Canterbury, England, in September of 2012, and she is currently developing a performance practice that aestheticizes both the internal and external embodiment(s) of "flow."

"No. Just ... No": page 28

***JEAN O'HARA***
is currently a PhD candidate in Theatre and Performance Studies at York University. The primary focus of her work is devised ensemble-based theatre that addresses socio-political issues. She has been a collaborator with Klamath Theatre Project, Native Earth, Centre for Indigenous Theatre, and the Alianait Festival. She has been directing and teaching theatre for the past fifteen years and her research interests include Indigenous theatre and representation, and queer performance.

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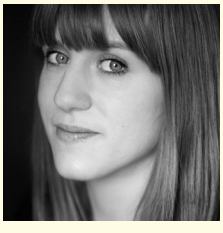
## DISPATCHES



***AMY SHOSTAK***
is the artistic director of Rapid Fire Theatre, Edmonton's longest-running improv-comedy company. She has been improvising with Rapid Fire since 2002, and her improv career has taken her all over Europe and North America. Amy is also a writer and actor, and has given two TedX lectures on the nature of collaboration. She was named one of Edmonton's Top 40 Under 40 by *Avenue Magazine* in 2012.

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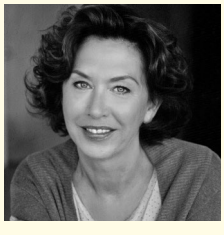

***JENN GRIFFIN***
a Vancouver actor/playwright, won the Sydney Risk award for her first play *Drinking with Persephone*. She has won two Jessie awards for acting, and her play Into the Waves was read both in Vancouver and in Toronto at Nightwood's Hysteria Festival. She was commissioned to write an original operetta for Fugue Theatre's *Via Beatrice* and is currently an associate at Playwright's Theatre Centre, where she is creating a new work entitled *The Long Call*.

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***MARILYN NORRY***
has thirty years' experience in Canadian film and theatre. A Jessie award winning actress, she is also a writer, editor, producer, and publisher. She was dramaturg at Playwright's Theatre Centre in Vancouver for nine years, a story editor on the television series *Madison*, and played a continuing role on *Battlestar Galactica*. She is the creator of *The Mother Project*, a project of plays and books dedicated to telling women's history one mother at a time.

*My Mother's Story*: page 37

*Editorial*

# Gender and Theatre at the Margins

BY NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

"At the margins" is where *alt. theatre* tends to spend its time. Dedicated to performance theory and practice from traditionally marginalized communities, with political foci, and of activist intent, the average issue of *alt* explores theatre at the margins of form, content, process, and perspective. Our tag line being "cultural diversity and the stage," pluralism and anti-racism are themes we feature most prominently. This issue was born from our editorial staff's desire to investigate in depth how gender and related issues—gendered performances, misogyny, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.—intersect with the topics that *alt* traditionally explores. The featured pieces were selected based on their collective ability to engage in critical conversation on gender performance and performativity, to showcase innovative work with gender-based impetuses, and to explore how processes of gendering impact theatre and the performing arts, on and off stage.

Even before unpacking ways the parameters of "gender" and "the margins" can lead us to diverse conversations about the theatre, at the most obvious and uncomplicated starting point—the question of equality between men and women in the theatre industry—we already encounter a mountain of things to say and work left to be done. It's no secret that even though women make up the majority of audiences and theatre school graduates, men still dominate the professional arena. In particular, male-identified people are more likely to occupy high-status roles: artistic directors, playwrights of mainstage works, leading actors. Conversely, just as helping professions outside of the arts continue to be seen as low-status and inherently "female," stage management, dramaturgy, and arts administration are theatre's motherly roles. A quick look around reveals that the lack of gender parity permeates theatre cultures and economies across the globe. Theatre companies in the US have their internalized preference for male-penned plays kept in check by the Guerrilla Girls. This anonymous collective of female theatre artists publishes an annual list of companies to boycott (or "Girlcott," as the list is called). In 2011-2012, the list featured over one hundred professional theatres in the US that failed to program at least one play written by a woman during the season. Across the pond, we see that those at the helm of the industry fail to take the gender gap seriously: a recent article in *The Guardian* reveals that the artistic directors of England's two biggest theatres, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company, have never directed a play by a woman (Higgins). In Canada, we are entering a season where women lead both the English and the French theatre sections of our National Arts Centre, and we are just coming off the NAC's first season in which *all* plays programmed were written by women. But as real as these victories may be, the overall picture is still grim. Rina Franticeli in 1986 and Rebecca Burton and Reina Green in 2006 published findings of comprehensive studies on inequities faced by women working in the Canadian theatre, reports which Shelly Scott references in "Talking to Each Other at the Margins." And in another recent investigation, Sarah O'Conner reports that women make up only 29% of artistic directors, 36% of working directors, and 29% of produced playwrights in the Canadian theatre industry (2).

Manifestations of gender-based inequality exist, of course, not just in practices and systems of work but also in narratives that form our cultural landscapes. Often stories are told through a male gaze, where that which is female or non-normatively gendered is seen as object and other. But the male gaze does not operate in isolation of other constructs of narrative power. Indeed, patriarchal and neocolonial structures work to uphold each other in a variety of ways in the popular imagination. In particular, empowered femaleness is constructed in ways that only permit entrance from Western doors, which results in the racialization of gender-based power structures in non-Western societies; misogyny and gender-based violence that exists in Western societies are swept under the rug. Margaret Wente provides an epitomic example of this cultural cognitive dissonance in her 2011 *Globe and Mail* commentary about SlutWalk: "Embrace your inner slut? Um, maybe not." She ridicules the Toronto-born international movement, which sets out to counter victim-blaming in situations of sexual assault, and maintains that violence against women is no longer an issue—in mainstream white Canada. Just as she dismisses rape culture as non-existent in dominant society, she eagerly volunteers that gender-based violence "is a very large problem in a number of Canada's South Asian communities," speculating that "[s]ome of York's first-generation immigrant students are no doubt safer on campus than they are in their own homes," and further offers that "violence against women across the North, and in certain aboriginal communities, shocks the conscience." Wente capitalizes on popular xenophobic imagining of non-white cultures as backward and misogynistic. In her racist construction of gendered violence, she frames the Western walls of the ivory-white tower as sites of refuge for South Asian-Canadian women, and also ignores the colonial dimensions of sexual violence against First Nations women on Turtle Island, where 86% of sexual assaults are perpetrated by non-Native men (Chekuru).

This colonial pseudo-feminism appears time and again: the Ukrainian protest group FEMEN uses nudity as a primary activist tactic, and in doing so decries conservatively clad cultures as being oppressed. Their events explicitly seek to "liberate" Muslim women from themselves and their cultures, without consulting the ostensibly oppressed. Such attitudes are not unique to racist journalists or protest groups; they are endemic in neocolonial, neoliberal cultures. Throughout the spring, North Americans were up in arms about rape cases in India, decrying this "cultural problem," while at the very same time debating whether the 16-year-old gang rape victim in Steubenville, Ohio, deserved to share in her rapists' culpability because she had been drinking and at a party. Upon the sentencing, a CNN reporter mourned that the all-American

assailants would have their lives ruined by jail time and a criminal record, saying they were "two young men that had such promising futures, star football players, very good students" (Ross). The cultural double standards of white-washed "feminism" rob non-Western women of their agency and deny Western women of their lived experiences of misogyny. In short, it hurts everyone.

In this issue, Marjan Moosavi and Jean O'Hara explore how racism and colonialism intersect with the construction of gendered power. In "Memoir of Tehran, Theatre in Toronto, and the Orientalism in Between," Moosavi unpacks how liberalistic narratives of success manifest in Western feminism, where liberation and the lack thereof is framed within Oriental/Occidental binaries: "fundamentalism/liberalism, East/West, and veiled/unveiled." When stories of women in the Middle East are told in English, it seems they tend to play to understandings of the West as "the ideal place for women to recognize their agency—as opposed to all the other uncivilized Muslim societies, which victimize them through the hands of their husbands and the country's politicians." She explores the phenomenon of "native informants," Iranian women memoirists writing for European and North American audiences, and assesses how one such memoir, Marina Nemat's *The Prisoner of Tehran*, translates on the Canadian stage.

Jean O'Hara reflects on the gender diversity in Waawaate Fobister's hit play *Agokwe*. "Agokwe" refers to a man who has "a balance of female and male spirits within him." Fobister says that before colonization, the Annishnabe "had enough wisdom to realize that there was enough room for more than two sexes in their world and so they welcomed every new agokwe born into their community." O'Hara demonstrates that the systems of oppression that we know as homophobia and cissexism are in fact colonial imports. Sandy Grande would agree: colonialism disrupted "not only the social, political, economic and cultural systems of indigenous peoples, but also the balance of gendered relations" in communities and families (151). This analysis suggests that the roots of patriarchy rest not simply in gendered systems, but in the colonial assembling of gendered systems. For such communities, liberation from gender-based oppression is a matter of decolonization, and not "whitestream" feminism, as Grande calls it (124). Self-identifying as a non-Native queer theatre artist, O'Hara notes that many preceding analyses of *Agokwe* have engaged with two-spiritedness within a Western understanding; she draws from the production, her time working with Fobister, and Indigenous scholars and artists to explore the play through a queer Indigenous lens.

O'Hara's analysis encourages us to not only consider colonialism in our reflections on gender roles, but also to question the legitimacy of a gender binary itself. As Fobister's imagining of Nanabush reminds us, gender is, after all, a performance. Exposing gender as performance is the modus operandi of the drag king duo, Ben&Pony. Angela "Pony" Meyer and photographer Shirley Tse guide us through the performativity of gender in their photo essay. Meyer and performance partner Elaine Gail (Ben) have created a series of drag characters that queer gender, race and class, and they explore how identities—in particular hegemonic identities—go unnoticed, are accepted as "normal," and thus remain invisible.

To challenge normative behaviours and practices is to transgress, and to transgress is, necessarily, risky. Is the risk worth it? Yes or no? Two of our contributors reference this tension. In "No. Just . . . No" Kelsy Vivash argues that the reasons the abject performance art of Millie Brown (nicknamed the "Vominatrix") is often met with refusal from audiences are the same reasons it succeeds as feminist praxis. As Vivash says, Brown's work "operates as a gesture towards the de-stratification of the ideological structures that enable the objectification of women." Through the "no" that the work provokes, it destabilizes normative expectations and understandings of the female body. In her Dispatch article "Saying "Yes" and Owning It," Amy Shostak delivers a short sermon on making strong choices as a woman in the male-dominated world of improvisational theatre. Anyone who has taken an improv class knows that saying "yes" is the first rule of this theatre practice. Players must work together to expand on each others' offers in order to create clear, cogent, and tenable narratives. Improvisers are trained to believe that they should never say "no" to a scene mate's offer. So what is one to do in a mid-scene moment when fellow performers and audiences wait for you to implicate yourself in a misogynistic framework? Shostak explores the potential of saying an empowered "yes" —not by conceding to on- and off-stage sexism, but by re-imagining the unspoken questions altogether.

This issue also celebrates the ways in which female relationships inspire artistic exploration and theatrical work. Shelley Scott discusses women's theatre festivals, maintaining that all-woman networks are not just sites to work toward gender equity, but intrinsically valuable in the gendered space's ability to facilitate community and mentorship. J. Paul Halferty speaks with Tawiah M'carthy about the critically acclaimed *Obaaberima*, M'carthy's play chronicling a young African-Canadian's journey across continents, genders, races, and sexualities. M'carthy shares that to create the show, he used modes of storytelling and other performance conventions inspired by visits with his grandmother. Marilyn Norry and Jen Griffin describe their community-based theatre project *My Mother's Story*, which engaged over one hundred women in the Vancouver area. They emphasize that the act of a group of women speaking on stage about their mothers is in itself feminist, and they reflect that the project allows participants to "confront and embrace" both their mothers' lives and their own.

This is the second time *alt.theatre* has put out a themed issue, after our two-part special in 2011 entitled Oral History and Performance. We plan to pursue more special issues in the years to come. We will also, certainly, continue to integrate considerations of gender into our exploration of theatre at the margins.

### *ERRATUM*

In the masthead of our previous issue (Vol 10.2), we neglected to credit the actor featured in the cover photo. The actor featured is Olga Barrios. *alt.theatre* apologizes and regrets the error.

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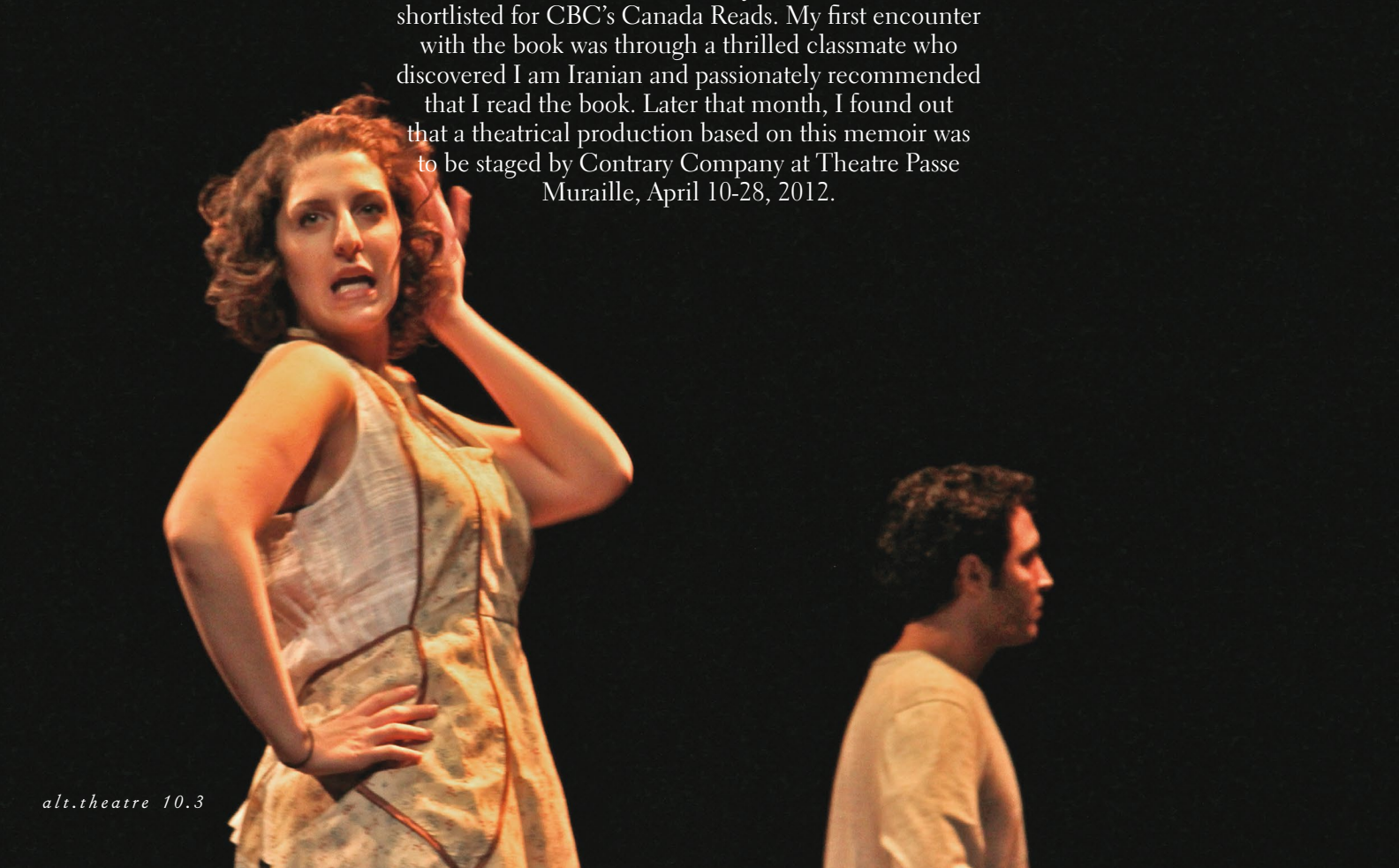
# MEMOIR OF TEHRAN, THEATRE IN TORONTO, AND THE ORIENTALISM IN BETWEEN [1]

BY MARJAN (SZ) MOOSAVI

I landed in Canada in January 2012, one month before Marina Nemat's *Prisoner of Tehran: A Memoir* was shortlisted for CBC's Canada Reads. My first encounter with the book was through a thrilled classmate who discovered I am Iranian and passionately recommended that I read the book. Later that month, I found out that a theatrical production based on this memoir was to be staged by Contrary Company at Theatre Passe Muraille, April 10-28, 2012.



*Prisoner of Tehran* was published in 2007 in Toronto. In her witness and survival narrative, Nemat weaves forward and backward in time, focusing on her experiences in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. As a sixteen-year-old Christian girl, Nemat was imprisoned in Evin Prison, the largest and most notorious prison in Iran, and sentenced to death for her political activities. In the narrative, Nemat's interrogator, Ali, falls in love with her, reduces her sentence to life in prison through his connections, and in return (while threatening her family as an additional pressure) forces her to change her religion and name to marry him. Two years later her husband is murdered, following a politically plotted assassination, and she is released from prison through her father-in-law's intervention. But Marina's family have no desire to listen to her prison memories, due to her disgraceful conversion and imprisonment.

I started writing this article by reading the narrative of *Prisoner of Tehran* in English in Toronto, and I finished writing about it in English in Tehran. From the very beginning, I found myself looking at the woman clad in a black veil on the book's cover and wondering what it was about this story that has attracted such extensive attention in Canada. More importantly, my reading of this memoir was disturbed by strange mixed feelings of interest and distaste, which led me to search for other Iranian memoirs written in English.

In my research I discovered an unprecedented increase in the number of exilic memoirs written by Iranian women in English in the post-9/11 period, books that focus on the traumatic impacts of the 1979 revolution and the forced migration and/or imprisonment of these women.[2] Such memoirs, which play a significant role in forming the popular understanding of Iran and Iranian women, are believed by many critics to operate as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, they raise consciousness and inform mass audiences about the injustices and inhumanity in certain parts of Iranian life, especially imprisonment. On the other hand, they tend to confirm certain presuppositions and misconceptions about Iranian lived experiences by relying on the binaries of fundamentalism/ liberalism, East/West, and veiled/unveiled.

These women memoirists, writing mainly for European and North American audiences while benefitting from familiar issues of their native society, function as what Hamid Dabbashi calls "native informers" (*Al-Ahram*).[3] A closer examination of Nemat's memoir reveals much about how she as a "native informer" tries to aggrandize the conflicts stemming from the above-mentioned binaries to invoke the sympathy of trustful Western audiences. Throughout her narrative—while heightening her connections and tendencies with Western cultural values, Russian ethnicity, Christian beliefs, and English literature—Nemat clearly shows her repugnance for the veil, her grandmother's disdain for the Persian language, her father's training experience in Western dance, and her patronizing attitude toward Muslim girls. In doing so, she not only collaborates in the construction of anti-Iranian belief systems but also reinforces the Western hegemonic discourse of Orientalism[4] in response to defiant and different political regimes and ideologies.

In line with the concept of Orientalism is the discourse of feminist Orientalism, which is fundamentally based on the assumption that the West/Occident is the ideal place for women to recognize their agency—as opposed to all the other uncivilized Muslim societies, which victimize them through the hands of their husbands and the country's politicians.[5] In representing a strong woman prisoner in the most notorious prison of the Islamic regime and embellishing this character with an inherent white Christian intellectual identity, Nemat in effect reinforces the stereotypes that reproduce the image of Muslim women as victims of a long tradition of misogynism and dogmatism in Islam.

Surfing on Persian weblogs, I discovered that the authenticity and veracity of Nemat's narrative have been widely challenged, particularly by former Evin political prisoners (see the websites of Iraj Mesdaghi and Monireh Baradaran). These sites most often argue that the author has softened the horrible circumstances of Evin and that she has had no right to create an imaginative story about a factual place in a specific period of history.[6] Nemat in her book's preface comments on the "fragmented and foggy" nature of memory; she admits that, relying on her memory, she embarks on "merging and reshaping lives" and "reconstruct[ing] the dialogues" in order to bring her memories "effectively … back to life" and grapple with memory's "habit of fading and playing tricks"(vii).

According to such an explanation, no author would be able to portray the dark aspects of their past life in an exact manner. The telling of memory involves juxtaposing words and beliefs stated in the present with those remembered from the past.[7] In the case of *Prisoner of Tehran*, one may argue that the memoirist's practice of recollecting her "fragmented" memories of Evin "effectively" after years of living abroad would lead her into a position that was similar to the point of view of an outsider. This outsider point of view is intermingled with the superior position that the narrator defines for herself in relation to her other inmates, classmates, and in-laws. As a political prisoner during the aftermath of revolution, she is the only inmate privileged enough to receive a different treatment—imprisonment and even nourishment. After marrying her interrogator, she receives a different diet and is allowed out of Evin most weekends, to shop and attend family gatherings.

Bearing all these considerations in mind, I shift my focus here to the textual and theatrical elements that operated throughout the project of transferring this memoir from page to the stage. As Nemat has repeatedly stated in various interviews (including the one we had together), the urge to inscribe and represent the silenced voices of Iranian political prisoners did not and never will leave her. Another challenging step for Nemat in fulfilling such an urge was cooperating with the "politically involved and community-connected" Contrary Company (*Prisoner*, Program) and Maja Ardal, the play's adapter and director, in staging her narrative. I asked Nemat to what extent she believed the stage production had been successful in representing the intensity of her pain. She admitted,

> A theatrical production cannot stage the whole book, even the book itself is not depicting my whole experience. . . . [C]onsidering the theatrical limitations and our financial problems, in fact, this production was far better than what I expected . . . We couldn't waste the time to represent all the details; instead we focused on the conditions of the young people, their hope and energy during the immediate years after the revolution and how they got terribly shattered.

As stated in the production's program, Ardal tried to "capture a particular slice of Marina's memoir"—more specifically, her imprisonment." In her interview, Ardal stated, "The spirit of youth lives in this story, and I wanted to explore in the adaptation how the hopes and dreams of young people can be snatched away by violent oppressive government." Within this thematic framework, the stage production focused on Nemat's early (school and friendship), middle (imprisonment), and later (marriage) experiences. The director gave weight to the essence of story through breath, voice, silence, lighting, and body movements. The only element of the production that gave substance to this representation of Nemat's prison life and character relations was its sound effects, which were exact, sharp, and intense. The show employed minimal music, but the vocal gestures—sobs, shocked gasps, and shudders—designed by Fides Krucker (the vocal director) were significantly effective.

Nevertheless, when we approach this play from the point of view of performance analysis, any hope of tracing a robust relationship between the text and its performance quickly dissolves. The spectator is left with a sense of detachment and an impression of distance, likely stemming from the minimalist techniques of acting and stage design that Ardal employed in her adaptation. The only stage prop in *Prisoner of Tehran* was a movable bench. Fifteen or so pairs of women's shoes were neatly arranged on each side of the bare stage, possibly signifying flogging as a frequent torture. The characters' costumes and make-up were rather simple and suggestive of Iranian sartorial codes in the 1970s—with the exception of Hamed, who was not bearded and costumed according to the details in the memoir.

The most elemental piece of costume in the theatrical production was a black chador. The chador has always been an emblematic element in Orientalist discourse. The chador's sharp contrast with the blueness of the background and whiteness of the words "Marina Nemat" on the front cover of the book; its italicized font throughout the memoir's pages; and its single and strong presence as the only prop exchanged between the two female actresses in the production all clearly convey how the binaries are operating throughout both memoir and its stage production. Differently put, within the prevalent discourse perpetuated by the West about the East, the chador constantly symbolizes a religious totalitarian regime and also Muslim women's lack of agential control over their body.

The show's reviews and the responses of spectators (both Iranians and others) reiterate the failure of the production team to substantiate the theatricalization of this memoir through any engaging mosaic of details or cues of Eastern life and subjectivity. The question thus remains: To what extent can a physical, minimalist approach in theatrical production meet the ends of staging a memoir about East for the Western audiences? And what especial dramaturgical preparations are needed to provide a coherent adaptation of such memoir?

Ardal noted in the program that "[the production] should have stark and sudden transitions like flashes of memory going through her [Marina's] mind." But the jumping transitions and overlapping scenes on the stage did not completely live up to their promise. Nemat's aesthetic strategies in composing her memoir are strong enough to make the book among the best appreciated memoirs, at least to those who do not doubt its veracity. But the visual and narrative gaps in the theatrical production of this memoir lag far behind. The book is replete with fully explained scenes of torture, as well as scenes that establish the characters' relationships. The theatrical production, however, lacked those moments in terms of both quantity and intensity. Marina's torture scene in the play, for instance, in which her interrogator flogs the soles of her feet, was not organically connected to the other scenes. In another scene, Sara, Marina's friend and cellmate, having heard about her brother's death in Evin, writes her memories all over her body. Even this scene, which, as Ardal states in her interview, has had the most captivating effect on her and is particularly related to her dramaturgical focus (the spirit of youth), was not represented on the stage.

The casting of the stage production also reveals the Orientalist leanings of the work. Along with the role of Marina, played by Bahareh Yaraghi, there are four other female roles and four male roles in the play. Yaraghi was competent and confident in her role, possibly due to her own Iranian origin and accent. However, the same cannot be said about Razi Shawahdeh, who played all the male roles, including Ali, Marina's interrogator and husband. In the memoir, the character of Ali was less Orientalized than Marina, resisting any clear-cut distinctions between fanatic Islamist interrogator and affectionate, generous husband. In Nemat's narrative, the multi-dimensionality of his character is convincingly elaborated through numerous and detailed scenes portraying his ideological positioning and practices in relation to her personal and professional life. In contrast, Ardal's dramaturgical and directorial choice to have all male characters played by one actor provided a less nuanced character of Ali, and thus left the audiences deprived of the complexity and flexibility of his character. As a dynamic character in the memoir, Ali doubts many of his own religious and moral values, and even embarks on a journey of self-recognition and change. His character is the only figure that can destabilize, to some extent, the Orientalist gender-constructs in the memoir. On the stage, however, the complexities of the prejudiced/tolerant Ali became vague due to the minimization of the number of actors and the "stark transitions" in the production. This resulted in a distorted representation of the truth about Ali's character and his "becoming," a shortcoming that ironically led to a further Orientalizing and alienating of the object/Other (here, Middle Eastern men) on the Western stage.

Furthermore, Ardal chose to have Shawahdeh play all the other male roles of the play: in addition to Ali, his father, and Arash (who are kind and supportive characters), he played Hamed, a barbarous and fanatical interrogator and Ali and Marina's inherent enemy. One might argue that choosing a single actor to play the role of three different and at times opposing male figures was an effective choice to relativize the black and white conceptions regarding Middle Eastern men. But this choice also homogenized Ali's and Hamed's behavioral and ideological differences and neglected the meaningful nuances in the characterization of Ali and Arash. In this sense, this approach in role distribution served to generalize the representation of Middle Eastern men, particularly when the actor's physical means of expression did not effectively enact such oppositions and dynamism.

And finally, in yet another Orientalizing effect of Shawahdeh's performance, he played all these roles with a distinct Arabic accent. For Canadian audiences, such an accent is assumed to be spoken by all Middle Eastern men, but for Persian audiences—who share the historical memory of the centuries-long colonization of their country by Arab culture and languages—the actor's Arabic accent would have different implications.

With regard to such politics of role distribution in the case of female characters, while the character of Marina was represented in a distinguished way by being played by only one actress, the role of the other women was minimized. Marina's classmates and in-laws were played by one actress (Mirian Katrib), and the voices of other female characters, including even Marina's mother and best friend, were dismissed from the production. This choice in effect contributed to creating another Orientalized representation of Eastern women for the consumption of white Western audiences. Such generalization with regard to the nature of Iranian men and women, combined with the uneven role distribution, exacerbated the outsider point of view mentioned above. It stripped the show of the required authenticity of characterization, a fault that has been identified in the memoir itself by its critics.

A final production element that contributed to the Orientalized tone of the play was its opening with the characters, behind the black curtain, singing and reciting in Arabic. A Persian speaker might wonder why these particular Arabic lines were selected for a memoir about Iran. This suggested two things: first, the general misconception that ignores the fundamental differences between Persian and Arabic culture, language, and civilization, considering these cultures and civilization as interchangeable; second, the Oriental understanding of Arabic as the language of backwardness, jihad, and oppression.

My conclusion regarding *Prisoner of Tehran* as a theatricalization of a prison memoir draws on two main points. First, these memoirists, as "native informers," while serving political testimony to the systemic crimes against certain political groups, can essentially support and sustain the existing Orientalist dichotomies I discussed above. The Western dramaturge and director must therefore be mindful of certain nuances in relation to theatricalizing characters, the dynamics of character relations, role distribution, and thematic solidarity; if these elements are not visually and spatially elaborated on the stage, they fail to captivate the mind of the respective spectators in the way that memoirs do. This failure deprives spectators not only of the opportunity to rethink and question their values and dispositions, but of the authenticity of that memoir and its theatrical production.

Second, and more importantly, although both memoir and production of *Prisoner of Tehran* reproduce Orientalist attitudes to varying degrees, the stage production succumbed more readily to an Orientalist framework due to its minimalist and physical representational style. By generalizing and reinforcing familiar Orientalist frameworks, the theatrical narrative of *Prisoner of Tehran* made the "staged" reproduction doubly distanced from its "paged" reproduction, which has itself been already distanced from its lived experience. Differently put, if Nemat's memoir can be chastised for its Orientalizing function, its theatrical production, with such generalization and under-representation, was doubly distant from truth and authenticity. Therefore, it robbed its Canadian spectators of the opportunity to receive a less biased picture of Iranian life and family; an opportunity that could have clearly led to relativization of some of their Orientalist understandings. In the absence of such values, I am placed—as an Iranian woman born to a Muslim family, coming from Tehran to live in Toronto—in an unstable position, oscillating between alienation and sympathy toward both of these (re) productions.

## NOTES

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Denis Salter, Nikki Shaffeeullah and Colette Stoeber for their generous feedback and insightful comments on various drafts of the essay, and also the *alt.theatre* editorial team and reviewers.

2 Some examples of memoirs published by Iranian women in the diaspora since 2000 include Davar Ardalan, *My Name is Iran: A Memoir*; *My Prison, My Home: One Woman's Story of Captivity in Iran*; Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*.

3 Dabbashi makes his argument in critiquing another acclaimed memoir written by Iranian female writer, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

4 The term Orientalism was first introduced by Edward Said, who believed that "Orient" or "Oriental" are the concepts produced in the course of Western knowledge production as a "style of thought" in order to both represent and "understand" Islam and Islamic societies. In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Said analyzed the ways through which Western scholars established such discursive binaries as East and West, and thereby presented West as subject versus East as "Other."

5 Feminist Orientalism within the context of Iran, is elaborately characterized by Parvin Paidar in her book *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1995).

6 Many, including Evin ex-political prisoners, have called Marina Nemat a "repentant," or "traitor" who benefiting from her privileges as being loved by her interrogator in past opportunistically depicted a romantic picture of Evin life in present. For protest against *Prisoner of Tehran* see www.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs/englishbooks.htm. At the time of writing the first drafts of this article, I was in Iran and most of those websites were blocked. Interestingly, Nemat's own website (www.marinanemat.com) was not blocked.

7 To pass a judgment over the truthfulness of Nemat's memoir is a meticulous and demanding task that is beyond the scope of this article and requires having access to the records of Evin's imprisonment, administration and surveillance systems. So it is the reader's and also the spectator's task to read and watch memory-based texts with an alert and questioning mind.

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# *Drag Kinging with Ben&Pony*

BY ANGELA M. MEYER (PONY)

Images 1 & 2
TOP: *White-Stuffy-Femme &*
BOTOM: *Proper-White-Gentleman*

Images 3 & 4
*Randy & Denis*

Images 5 & 6
*Gay Unicorns*

**WHO ARE BEN&PONY?** BEN&PONY CONSISTS OF PONYBOI/ANGELA MEYER (MYSELF) AND BEN SOVER/ELAINE GAIL WANNECHKO, A DRAG DUO WHO AT THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT IDENTIFY AS A QUEER BOI/LESBRO AND A QUEER ANDROGYNOUS BISEXUAL, RESPECTIVELY. WE ARE ARTISTS, RESEARCHERS, PERFORMERS, MOVERS, DRAG KINGS, AND LOVERS. WE USE DRAG KINGING AS A MEANS OF EXPLORING GENDER AND GENDER-QUEER[1] RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THEATRICALITY AND PERFORMANCE. IN THIS EXPLORATION WE ALSO CONSIDER HOW GENDER OPPRESSION INTERSECTS WITH OTHER FORMS OF OPPRESSION AND HOW THESE INTERSECTIONS AFFECT OUR ARTISTIC PERFORMANCES OF GENDER.

We have performed in a variety of spaces, including intimate queer bars, large theatres, university classrooms, and public urban spaces. Like other drag king performers and scholars, our work exists at the intersections of art, academia, and activism. But unlike a lot of early kinging, which seemed to predominantly focus on solo performance (see Halberstam & Troka, Lebesco, & Noble),[2] all of our kinging works with a relational and structural constitution of gender. We consider, for example, how gender expression and performance by a singular person in any moment is directly related to and changes on the basis of how that person exists in relation to another.

As artists in our queer community, we are also involved in a movement that works toward creating anti-oppressive, inclusive, and safe(r) queer spaces. We start by questioning the assumption that queer (and gay) spaces are necessarily safe or inclusive spaces. Just because queers gather in a particular place, for example, doesn't mean these spaces are free from racist, abelist, transphobic, or normative gendered practices. As performers, we feel that it's important to engage with this idea of safe(r) spaces in relation to systems of domination and privilege. Although we cannot guarantee that a space is safe and we understand that we may fail in our attempts to create safe(r) spaces, we see our approach to safe(r) spaces as an ethical and artistic process rather than a particular outcome.

With this in mind, we think of our performances as conversations with and among audiences; we carefully consider our subject positions and our intentions within this conversation. We ask ourselves, for example, what is our message? What are our cultural backgrounds, and how do these influence our message? When devising our performances, we think critically about the presentation of cultural appropriation, triggering elements (such as re-enacted violence), and the effects of disempowering characters, performative elements, costumes, or themes that might belittle or insult particular communities. We perform not only because we enjoy the legendary Fame and Glory, but also because we want to help create gender-queer art, activism, and community in Edmonton and other cities. In this way, we see our work to be, in part, about raising social awareness of how gender is constructed and how we might undo gender binaries.

Over the past year, our aim has been to create work that queers desire, space, and gendered power dynamics and that critically engages with "whiteness." To do this, we use parody, gender theory, hyperbole, the re-arranging/queering of power dynamics, erotic spectacles, movement, gesture, costume, music, and engaging with queer and pop culture. In the following sections, I briefly outline some of the traditions of drag kinging, how we fit into those traditions, and how we challenge them. I then provide three examples of how we king, framing each of these examples within a pair of king characters. In each I also attempt to unpack how Ben&Pony critically engage with queering gender, space and visibility, and race/whiteness. The photographs are from a public photo shoot with Shirley Tse in Edmonton, Alberta. We hope this photo-essay provokes further engagement on these very important issues.

### *What is drag kinging?*

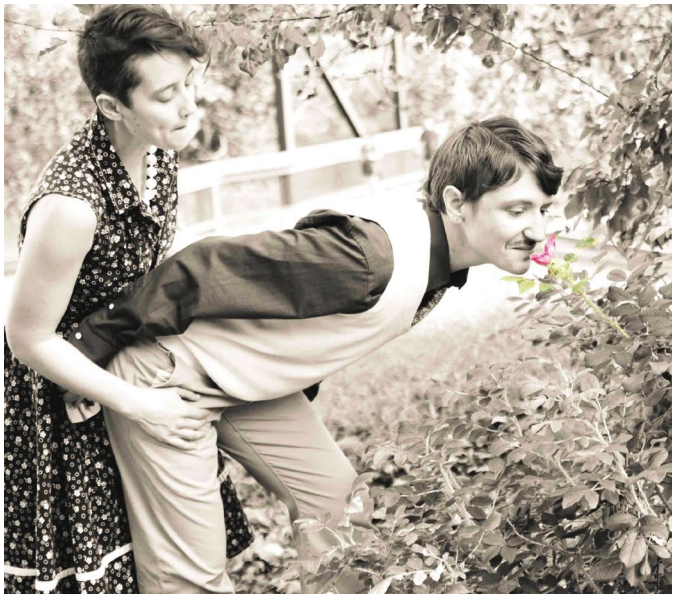
People often think drag kings are simply the opposite of drag queens. Unlike drag queens, however, who have a longer (and different) history and who have become part of contemporary pop culture, the history and culture of drag kinging is much less familiar to those outside of the practice. In my opinion, although kings and queens may share a general desire to entertain or to critique heteronormativity, they usually have different relationships to embodiment, to camp, to the performativity of gender, to feminism, and to the history of misogyny and violence against women (see, Rupp, Taylor, & Shapiro; Halberstam; Newton; Patterson).

Judith (Jack) Halberstam, author of *Female Masculinity*, traces the origin of the current drag king movement to the early 1990s. Early drag kings in North America and Europe performed, parodied, and sometimes paid tribute to various kinds of dominant, marginal, and abject masculinities. Unlike the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century male impersonators, for example, who strove to produce a believable maleness, Halberstam defines the drag king as usually a female who "performs masculinity (often parodically) and

makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity the mainstay of her act" (232). Contemporary kinging (and some early kings too), however, includes a much wider variety of identifications and pays more attention to the deconstruction of sex. Drag kinging today might include transgender people performing masculinity or femininity or high femme[3] (aka hyper-femininity); people with breasts or ovaries[4] performing masculinity; queer men performing masculinity; or female-identified people performing femininity. Troka, Lebesco, and Noble's *The Drag King Anthology* published in 2002 also provides a great resource for how people were kinging in the 1990s and early 2000s outside of New York, London, and San Francisco (which were Halberstam's focus).

As you will read below, Ben&Pony go far beyond the limited definition of kinging that Halberstam offers. In fact, we think kinging today cannot be so easily separated from a broader medium of gender-queer performance, at least in terms of who kings share the stage with. This may have been the case in the 1990s drag scenes as well, but today many drag king scenes reflect the increasing complexity with which people articulate their gendered and sexual subject positions. Now in its fourteenth year, the annual International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKE), for example, brings together drag kings, femmes, genderbenders, transgender performers, burlesque, and other gender artists (http://idke.org/).

Kinging has the potential to both subvert *and reinforce* negative stereotypes about race, gender, ability, or class. For example, the practice can offer a highly desirable form of queer entertainment. These performances can challenge the "naturalness" of masculinity, exposing the structures of dominant masculinity or offering representations of alternative ones. Kinging can also offer a way to express masculinities or gender identifications on stage that we want to later take into our daily lives. Kings can also queen.[5] We think kinging can be an exciting way to build queer community, art, and activism. But it can also offend, appropriate, and disrespect. Ben&Pony work to expose masculinity as a performance, to undo gender binaries, and to queer gendered power dynamics while also trying to avoid the pitfalls of kinging. Although we don't claim to always be totally successful in these aims, we do try to be mindful about not reproducing oppressive hierarchies in performance.



### *White-Stuffy-Femme & Proper-White-Gentleman*
*Marking whiteness & queering hetero-sex*

In our performances of White-Stuffy-Femme (WSF) & Proper-White-Gentleman (PWG) we make our own whiteness visible, thereby drawing attention to how whiteness itself is a constructed identity. We do this with subtle nuances of gesture and a kind of well-groomed 1950s style of costuming (Images 1 & 2). PWG is stiff and WSF is refined; both move through space in a privileged way, taking up lots of space and gazing outward. These two characters mark an exaggerated kind of stuffy middle-class identity concerned with proper manners, cleanliness, and smiles so forced they make you uncomfortable. We attempt to mark whiteness in this piece (and in others), because whiteness in North American culture tends to remain invisible; it is often considered the "norm" against which all others are marked as racialized subjects.

WSF & PWG performed most recently at the IDKE 14 Showcase in Cleveland, Ohio, where they did a drag number to the song, "Do You Take It (in the ass)?" by Canadian cabaret duo The Wet Spots. What we want to do politically with this piece, at least for starters, is to suggest that female attire and bodies/people with vaginas do *not* signal a "penile penetration opportunity." For example, in addition to marking whiteness, this piece is also a parody on the power dynamics of heteronormative couples, highlighting that both partners (cisgender[6] men and cisgender women) are capable of being penetrated (i.e., near the end of the act, WSF surprises the audience by pulling up her dress and revealing a large and lovely strap-on. She then takes PWG from behind and simulates anal penetration).

This queering of "sex" (hetero-normative sex) is important on a number of levels: For example, just as many queer and transpeople (including post–bottom surgery MTFs[7]) might re-negotiate heteronormative protocols, cisgender women who have cisgender male partners can redefine how often sex means penile-vaginal penetration, and those women can also claim their right to *not* be *the only one* who is penetrable. Heterosexual couples/people can (and some do) have queer sex, and we want to illustrate that possibility. Further disruption of sex (or heterosexual sex) involves rejecting the false conflation of a penis with a man, with masculinity, with power, and with dominance. We offer this suggestion with our strap-on reveal in live performance and in the positioning of our bodies in the photographs. In Image 1, for example, PWG is positioned lower than WSF; and in Image 2, WSF is taking PWG from behind. To us, this re-conceptualization of power/dominance has a great deal of potential: We ask ourselves, for example, how this queering can help disrupt some of the foundations and justifications for violence against women and transpeople?

In queering hetero-sex *and* marking whiteness, these characters occupy a strange existence, one that reflects and changes with the spaces they occupy. As Henry Lefebvre describes, social space is not a subject, object, or container with boundaries, but rather a set of relationships and forms between people and things. Indeed, meanings embedded in space reflect the identities of the people who use them, but people also shape and transform the meanings and uses of space through embodied performances. Queering space is thus about disrupting power. It's not just about occupying a space

with queer people, but about celebrating non-normative ways of relating to others and to our environments.

WSF & PWG have done their queerings in a variety of spaces and for a variety of people, including for queer audiences in small bars and large theatres, for undergraduate students in university classrooms, for a photographer and the public in a public park, and for a kinky straight crowd in a good-sized bar/special event venue. In each of these spaces, we have a different relationship with our audience; in each of these spaces, desire, parody, and performance are understood and read differently. WSF can't, for example, just flash out her dildo and simulate fucking Ben in the ass whilst the two are in public. And while, in purposefully queer performative spaces, her whiteness can more easily be read as a parody, in public this is not the case. The photographs from the public photo shoot in the park (Images 1 & 2), however, somehow capture the queering of hetero-sex that we were after, even though the space in which we took the photos was actually very much hetero-normative (as most public space tends to be).

After doing this public photo shoot, I also began feeling that WSF wasn't particularly safe for other people. At times I channelled characteristics of stuffy whiteness familiar to me, and at those times I began to feel WSF was just reproducing a kind of white supremacy in the ways she took up space (clinging to her man for protection) and in the way she gazed out and internally judged and sometimes feared "others" around her. This was unsettling, uncomfortable, and confusing. I felt as if I passed as this character, which compounded those feelings. Why do I want to be doing this, I asked myself? Ben had similar feelings of "I don't wanna be this person!" while out in public, but he also felt the fear of "being discovered." The fact that I was obviously wearing a costume—my dress wasn't from this era—coupled with our "queer haircuts" may have meant we didn't quite pass as a middle-class white hetero couple. But we were still left wondering about the political usefulness of bringing WSF & PWG into public, and about how to make their parody more visible in order to avoid simply reproducing white supremacy.

### *Randy & Dennis*
*White-trash-boys-in-love*

Randy & Dennis are two white-trash-boys-in-love. Together they embody our queering of working-class white masculinity (although these characters don't really like working). For the most part, Randy & Dennis like hanging out, having fun, drinking beer, smoking weed, and being free from "the man." We bring these characteristics to our performances of R & D through very unfashionable costuming (e.g., fanny packs!), a deliberately non-"intellectual" language, simple props (beer cans, joints), and "ugly" facial expressions. On the surface, these all have the potential to provoke a classist stereotype about ignorance and laziness. But this is not our message. Randy & Dennis come out of part of who we are; they reflect some of our relationships to/with this type of masculinity and with these class subjectivities. We both have roots in white working-class families (rural and urban, with some aspiring middle class-ness), and Randy & Dennis' desires are very familiar to us. They don't have to participate in capitalism, production, or menial labour just to


**DRAG KINGING** | by Angela M. Meyer (Pony)

appear morally good in the eyes of others, which is part of our queering of class norms. In many ways, Randy & Dennis rebel against the middle and working class values intertwined with heterosexuality, reproduction, and the forty-hour work week. In other words, although Randy & Dennis are white queer maybe middle-class men, we don't think they are particularly good homonationalists[8]—at least we don't want them to be.

Randy & Dennis also exist in an environment that does not support their love for each other. Although they spend most of their time together, they are not overly affectionate in public and are often read as friends rather than lovers (see Image 3). In queer performance spaces, Randy & Dennis are usually funny and entertaining, but we try to also show glimpses of their feelings and their intimacy toward each other as they would exist in a semi-closeted way (see Image 4). These intimacies are meant to be sweet rather than comedic or parodic. In this way, Randy & Dennis could potentially reinforce (homo) normative ideas, such as the "privacy of intimacy." But our reluctance toward flamboyance is purposeful: we want to avoid theatrical caricatures (parody) and we want the expressions of their sexuality to be "real" as they exist in their homophobic world. Because of their brightly clad costuming, however, Dennis & Randy do read as rather theatrical. But they are currently working on getting some new gear as soon as they sell some old cds back to the pawn shop.

In both public and queer spaces, we perform Randy & Dennis's masculinity with virtually no queer flare in their movements or speech. They therefore seem more acceptable/accepted in public; they feel safe(r) for us and for other people in public spaces as compared to WSF & PWG and our gay unicorns (see below). Comparing their race invisibility, for example, to WSF & PWG's race (hyper?) visibility, we wonder about the consequences and political usefulness of the experiences of public visibility for each set of characters—both in terms of queerness and whiteness? We ask how this changes when layered with class queerings? To be sure, we don't have the answers to how to negotiate the complex and sometimes confusing layers of privilege and oppression—in life or in performance. But we think performing and reflecting on these characters is a valuable artistic and ethical practice that can shed some light on our experiences of race privilege, particularly within our own queer subjectivities.

### *Gay unicorns*

Our gay-queer-faggy-trans unicorns are about magic, adventures, attending to bodily urges, fun, wildness, consent, power, riding backsides, and being part of a pack. They can be found on the stage, at parties, or running around in downtown Edmonton parking lots. These little pony-daddies like playing with power and audience participation. They often gallop and hop through space (Image 5), frequently stopping out of curiosity to smell and touch things (and maybe hump things, too). In safely queer performance spaces, these ponies like to be ridden by their fellow queers. And those queers seem to really like stroking unicorn horns! Sometimes these unicorns are docile and easily ridden; other times they like to "top from the bottom."[9] But because they are very visibly homo, gender-confusing, and somewhat inappropriately dressed, these ponies

don't always feel safe in public. They are simultaneously flamboyant and vulnerable in public spaces.

These queer creatures, because they are so openly flamboyant, help us to create a sense of community (Image 6). They represent and (re)create temporary spaces of transgression where we can embrace deviant sexual expressions and different kinds of kink. We can put these on display and not feel ashamed but empowered, in both public and purposefully queer spaces. But their queerness is so visible and their symbolic power so gay that they may even work to reaffirm stereotypical gayness, rather than to challenge norms. Interestingly, unicorns seem to have become gay cultural symbols (often coupled with rainbows). We aren't really sure how this happened. Maybe it has to do with associations of fantasy and sparkles, which are pretty gay. Or perhaps unicorns, as a gay cultural phenomena, could be seen as reclaiming stereotypical (and derogatory) connotations of the unicorn as "gay" (as in stupid and effeminate) and making the symbol actually "gay" (as in flamboyantly homo in aesthetic and fabulous). Either way, it is a bit odd (and fitting?) to reclaim a mythological symbol that was for so long associated with purity and female virgins! As unicorns continue to infiltrate pop culture, we might question how much this reflects a cultural embrace or appropriation of gay iconography. In fact, perhaps these little daddies aren't a parody of gayness at all, but are rather a parody and a queering of the purity/whiteness associated with the mythology of these creatures.

### *Concluding thoughts*

In this piece, we have shared some critical reflections on our kinging. It's important, too, that readers know how writing this piece, and others like it, is just as much part of our process as performing. Writing, performing, talking to other people, and reflecting are all part of a cyclical process of discovering whether our characters can or cannot do what we want them to do, whether we agree with them politically, and whether they are safe for us and for other people. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to know if everything we intend manifests in performance. But we are certain that forethought, critical reflection, and ongoing dialogue are worthwhile and valuable in order to investigate the ethics of our own artistic—and personal—practices.

## NOTES

* I would like to especially thank Elaine Gail Wannechko for their contributions and inspirations for this article. Without this very special Drag Daddy this piece wouldn't have been possible. I'd also like to say thanks to those lovely friends who were willing to proof and critically discuss the piece.

1 We use the re-appropriated theoretical and political term *queer* to connote a politics aimed at disrupting normative and stable gender and sexual binary constructions, such as man/woman; male/female; femininity/masculinity; or heterosexual/homosexual. For us, queer can also be an identity term that both resists these binaries and challenges the idea of a stable and fixed identity altogether.

2 The style of individual king acts is particularly characteristic of the drag king scenes outlined by Halberstam in San Francisco, New York, and London. A notable exception is the H.I.S. Kings in Columbus, Ohio (see Piontek).

3 By "high femme" I am referring to a performance or a person which/who intentionally and consistently embraces and expresses femininity past the point that most straight women do. Think of this phrase: "She's so high femme, she's sometimes mistaken for a drag queen."

4 Following Dean Spade's suggestion, I use the phrase "people with breasts or ovaries" rather than "female-bodied" persons in an attempt to adjust gender-normative language associated with particular bodies. I'm trying to refrain from using language that supports the idea that certain body parts constitute a person's gender identity. For more, see Dean Spade's "Purportedly-Gendered Body Parts" www.deanspade.net/2011/02/03/about-purportedly-gendered-body-parts

5 Queening is the performance of hyperfemininity, usually done by gay men, but not always. The phrase "Kings can queen" refers to someone who identifies as a king or who usually performs as a king performing hyperfemininity.

6 Cisgender refers to people who feel that their gender identity matches their body/sex or to people who do not identify as transgender. Using cisgender is also a way of drawing attention to an unmarked norm.

7 MTF (male to female) refers to a transperson who identifies as female.

8 Homonationalist refers to a "homonormative nationalist." "Homonormativity," for example, "has been theorized by Lisa Duggan as a "new neo-liberal sexual politics" that hinges upon "the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (179). Puar states, "For contemporary forms of US nationalism and patriotism, the production of gay and queer bodies is crucial to the deployment of nationalism, insofar as these perverse bodies reiterate heterosexuality as the norm but also because certain domesticated homosexual bodies provide ammunition to reinforce nationalist projects" (68).

9 The idea for these little unicorn daddies came from Ponyboi's namesake, which led us to explore the kinks of ponyplay, a type of animal role-play that can be either non-sexual or erotic sexual role play. Although we're not quite (yet) leather-clad ponies and riders, our queer unicorns are still, in part, about performances of power and animal fetishism.

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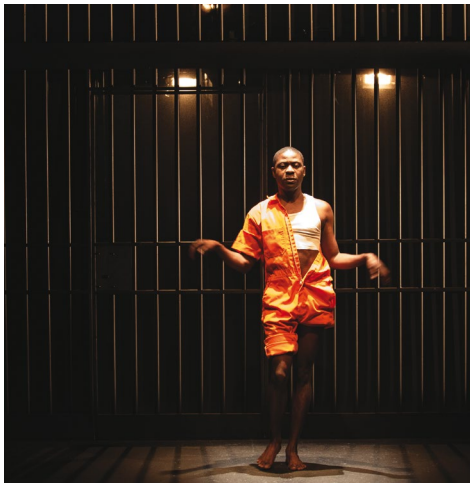
# An Intercultural "Outdooring": Tawiah M'carthy's *Obaaberima*

BY J. PAUL HALFERTY



I had the chance to see *Obaaberima*, Tawiah M'carthy's one-person show, at Buddies in Bad Times theatre in Toronto, where it premiered September 2012, directed by Evalyn Parry. *Obaaberima*, which means "girly-boy" in the Twi language, native to Ghana, is a play about the power of storytelling as vehicle for both self-discovery and self-acceptance. It concerns how we reconcile our various identities, our past and present, and the responsibility we bear to others and ourselves.

The play tells the life story of Agyeman, a young African man who has moved from Ghana to Canada to go to university and fulfill his social, cultural, and familial duties. The responsibilities he bears were performatively pronounced seven days after his birth in a traditional Ghanaian naming ritual, called "outdooring." Through this ritual, Agyeman's place in the universe and his future role in the world were pronounced in the meaning of his name: "he who serves nations." But Agyeman has difficulties reconciling his present life in Canada with his past in Ghana, his personal desires with his obligations to others. Trying to be the man he thinks he must be to fulfill his destiny, Agyeman tells lies and keeps secrets, leading him into a series of events that land him in a Canadian jail, having committed a violent crime.

It is here, in prison, that the action of *Obaaberima* begins: on the eve of his release, Agyeman shares his story with his fellow inmates, publicly reinventing, reclaiming, and renaming himself through storytelling—a second "outdooring."

**J. Paul Halferty**: *Obaaberima* bills itself as a multicultural approach to storytelling, and in interviews you've said that its performance conventions, especially its modes of storytelling, were inspired by visits with your grandmother. Can you tell us first about these experiences of storytelling, and then how they've influence *Obaaberima*?

**Tawiah M'carthy**: My grandmother, my mother's mother, was a "queen mother" in a small town called Tutu in the eastern region of Ghana. A queen mother is the female ruling power to the king: she is in charge of keeping traditions and also serves as an advisor to the king. Normally, it's the chief's sister or someone from the mother's side of the royal family.

I have an aunt who lives in Suhum, a small town between Tutu and Accra, the city where I grew up in Ghana. During summer vacation, my mom would send us to visit my aunt, especially when my grandmother was going to be there. Some nights, if my grandmother wasn't too tired, she would sit outside the house in a chair, and myself and most of my cousins would sit around her and kind of wait for her to start telling a story. Normally, she would start singing, and then she would start telling riddles, and we would join in trying to solve these riddles, and from there it would kind of evolve into a story. Most of the time it was an Anansi story—Anansi is the spider and a trickster character in Ghanaian folklore. He was the one we learned all the lessons from because he was always up to something. And as a child you were always excited to hear what kind of trouble Anansi was getting into.

As the story was being told there'd be some dancing and music. Sometimes we would just use a plastic bucket and start drumming on it to create the sounds, but these elements would make their way into the story. My father's family is Christian, and we grew up as a Christian family, but my mother's family, although they were Christians, they were also more active in traditional practices. They went to the festivals and knew more about the customs. My cousins knew more of the traditional dances, so I learned from them, imitating what they did. And if we weren't doing it right, my grandmother would correct us. So we would keep going with the story: her telling it and us creating it together, through music and dance. And these are the elements that inform *Obaaberima*. It starts with the story, and the sound comes in, and the song comes in, and the little musical nuances come in. It's the kind of storytelling that my grandmother did that I kind of adapted to create *Obaaberima*.

**JPH**: Could you talk about the development of the play?

**TM**: I had written a poem called "Red High Heels," which was actually going to be the name of the play. The poem was about this young boy standing in front of his mother's mirror trying on her red high heels. I applied for the Young Creators Unit at Buddies in Bad Times theatre in 2008 with that poem. I started to work on it with Evalyn Parry in the Young Creators Unit, who continued to work with me through the development of *Obaaberima* and who directed the show at Buddies. While writing, new characters started opening up. One of the first characters was Sibongile, who is Agyeman's feminine self. Opayin, who is an older man—a kind of mentor, friend, and lover to Agyeman—came next. Then Nana Osei, Agyeman's school friend and lover came, and then Maame and the Canadian characters all came after that.

So first we created a twenty-minute piece that had Sibogile, Opayin, and Agyeman, which I performed at the Rhubarb festival in 2009 and then again the inaugural QueerActs festival—a theatre and performance festival in Halifax. When I came back I looked at the script again. The story was not complete. There were a lot of questions that surrounded that image of Agyeman, the young boy in red high heels, that needed to be fleshed out. And I needed to bring in some new characters to hear their voices and their relationship to Agyeman and his journey. We did another workshop, and then we introduced music to it. Music was something I wanted to explore, so Evalyn and I thought we should bring in a musician and start creating sound and music that was going to support the piece.

**JPH**: Yes, music figures prominently in *Obaaberima*, in which you have a live musician—Kobena Aquaa-Harrison—on stage with you. Did working with Kobena inform the creation of the play?

**TM**: Yes, it did. As we began to work on our feet with Kobena we found that a lot of text was disappearing and that the movement was taking the place of the text. We found that the body held a lot of the information. When you look at theatre as I know it, growing up in Ghana, with all the elements coming together—theatre, music, dance, storytelling—the roles of the artist kind of move around. You have moments in the story when it's the music and the dance that leads the story. And you have moments in the story when the storytelling leads the story. But in the end, all of these elements are characters in the performance. Having Kobena opened up a new world by adding sound—sound that the body could listen to, sound that the body could move to, sound that could lead the body—and we used it to introduce characters and

events within the play. It also helped that Kobena knew some of the traditions, and he knew how these things worked. It was a lot of playing together, and Kobena, as a musician, literally became the second storyteller within the piece.

It was an amazing, amazing experience, going through the process of improvisation and discovery. We didn't come in saying, "Okay, this is what is going to happen at this point." Kobena came in as an artist and I came in as an artist and we created collectively, with Evalyn as an outside eye watching and directing us. By working together, Kobena and I created a dialogue, we created a vocabulary for ourselves as artists within the piece. And I've haven't had this experience working in theatre in Canada. This is the first time I've had that experience, working with him, and I believe our work together comes from a tradition where there is that kind of interplay between music, dance, and storytelling. We would say, "We need to explore moving here," and I would start moving and he would start playing, or he would start playing and I would start moving. It gave a lot to the exploration, to move and play, and to find the body and find the voice of these characters. The music also brought more of a Ghanaian tone to the performance, which is something that I really wanted.

**JPH**: Another important theme in the play is naming, and the power of a name. The performance begins with Sibongile explaining the Ghanaian practice of "outdooring," when a child, in her words, is "given a name that tells where they are from and who they are to be." Would you speak about this practice and how it functions in the play.

**TM**: In Ghana when a child is a born, they are kept indoors for no less than seven days. If that child makes it through the first week, then the beginning of their life is marked by a ceremony called "outdooring": a naming ceremony at which the child is brought out of the house and is introduced to family, friends, and the community. The name you are given becomes your path, your box to carry. It signifies your lineage—"son of this person from this region"—and your future, which is conveyed in the meaning of your name. And it is also the role that you will play. You play a role in the family and in the history of the family which becomes the history of the community, and the history of the country, and the history of the universe—and it builds on and on and on. You build your life in relation to your name in whichever way you want to build it, but the people who are there at the ceremony are witnesses, they help you, but you're accountable to them—and they become the witnesses to your life.

So, in *Obaaberima* Agyeman has that sense of responsibility to his family and his community, and in a sense his life is not completely his own. Whatever choices that he's making, as much as he's making them, they are not just for him. He must give back to the people who have welcomed him into this world. So that is the sense of responsibility he carries, which is signified in his name and in his outdooring. Even when he comes to Canada, he keeps saying he needs to go back home. He needs to go back home and give back. You also see that sense of responsibility in Nana Osei, who goes back home and gives back because home gave to him. Home is what made you. Home created you, and you have to give back.

**JPH**: Opayin paints a picture of Agyeman, but he paints him as a woman and asks Agyeman to name the woman in the painting. In doing so, Ageyman is ostensibly naming his feminine self. Of what significance is naming in that instance?

**TM**: It's power. Opayin gives Agyeman the opportunity to call something into being for himself. And that's why his relationship with Opayin is so important, because that is what Opayin gave to him. He gave Agyeman the power to name a part of himself, to call it into being, because when you name it, it exists, it's there. That's what leads their relationship. First of all, Opayin recognized that part of Agyeman, and created an image of that part of him. Agyeman got to name it, which means that part existed with him and Opayin. Agyeman and Opayin were the witnesses to Sibongile's existing, to this being that was created, that was in him to live and to have a life. It was a gift of empowerment. It was a gift of self. And that's where the name comes from: Sibongile means "thanks." By naming this part of himself "Sibongile," he thanks Opayin for giving him this gift. He thanks him for giving him the opportunity to "come out"—and "call out"—this part of himself.

**JPH**: But Agyeman only shows Sibongile to Opyain. That is, until the end the play—after his experiences in Canada, in prison, and the performance itself, which he/Sibongile pronounces as Sibongile's "outdooring."

**TM**: At the end of the play, he has integrated himself. He is who he is. Because it has all come together at this point. His journey has been a discovery, and in the end Agyeman realizes, "I've been that person, I've been that person, and I've been that person. I've had all these names, but because I was living these identities in separate spheres, and not living openly, I was never complete." But when he puts them all together, he is more complete. Before, he was living in secrets. Now he is moving into the open. Through telling the story, his story, to his cellmates in the prison, he is performing his own outdooring.

Agyeman still has a vision that is based in his name, in his community, in his responsibility—that's never gone away. Now his decision becomes about whether he is going to go through with it, and whether it's going to take a different angle than the one he had envisioned, or the one he thinks his family and community envisioned for him. If I see the future for Agyeman, I see him being a leader and going back home to Ghana and fighting for queer rights and gay rights. That's how I would see his future unfolding. Is that going to happen? I really don't know. But he's come to a point where all of a sudden he is worthy of the name Agyeman. By integrating and acknowledging his various names, identities, experiences, he can now become a leader of a nation.

# TALKING TO EACH OTHER AT THE MARGINS: THE 2012 WOMEN PLAY-WRIGHTS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AND FEMFEST 2012

BY SHELLEY SCOTT

In their article entitled "Women in Theatre: Here, There, Everywhere and Nowhere," Rebecca Burton and Reina Green report on the findings of "Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women's Initiative," released in 2006 to update the famous 1982 Rina Fraticelli report on the status of women in Canadian theatre.

© Janet Shum / Francesca Cotroneo in *Immigration Stories* by Hope McIntyre, produced at FemFest 2012.

Fraticelli's report showed that "women form the vast majority of theatre school graduates as well as the vast majority of amateur (unpaid), volunteer and community theatre workers" (Fraticelli qtd. in Burton and Green 58). Burton and Green note that many theatre initiatives—including women's festivals—were launched as a response to the Fraticelli report (60). Similarly, in her review of the first FemFest held in Winnipeg in 2003, Claire Borody writes, "A recent discussion on the Playwrights Guild of Canada Women's Caucus listserv revealed that women are generally well represented at festivals and at new play contests in which original material was workshopped. Nevertheless, these numbers do not translate into professional productions of the plays" (90).

Burton and Green characterize this contradiction—high representation at festivals versus low representation in mainstream theatre—as a gap between women's aspirations and their legitimation (65). But rather than devaluing women's festivals, seeing them only as a means to the end of professional production, I want to argue that they have great worth in their own right. Burton and Green suggest that the answer to the question of how women's voices can come together is to "be found through women in theatre creating their own supportive community" (71), and they specifically advocate networking and mentorship (72). This essay focuses on two women's theatre festivals which offer exactly that.

The Women Playwrights International Conference (WPIC) in Stockholm and FemFest in Winnipeg were held one month apart in 2012. What are some common features of festivals as seemingly diverse as these two? Both bring in productions from elsewhere; offer an educational training and workshop component; feature keynote speakers and visiting guest artists; showcase the work of emerging artists through staged readings; offer an award or contest of some kind; bring together different generations and communities; and co-produce with another body or institution, whether a theatre or a university. In this essay, I will explore the benefit of these two festivals to the women who attended them. And I will argue that it is possible for us to see women's festivals not (or not only) as a means to develop plays and artists towards professional careers in the "cultural industry," but rather as a valuable end in themselves.

## *NINTH WPIC, AUGUST 15-20, 2012—STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN*

The WPIC is held every three years, and from its inauguration in Buffalo, New York, in 1988 it moved to Toronto in 1991 (where it was held at York University's Glendon College) and then to Australia, Ireland, Greece, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India. According to one of the initiators, Anna Kay Frances, it was at the Toronto conference that the first move was made to create an International Advisory Committee and to ensure that some sort of on-going organization would ensure the conferences continue (Newsletter). The Stockholm conference theme was "The Democratic Stage," and as WPI president Lene Therese Teigen wrote in her welcoming statement, "The world has changed in the last 24 years, as well as WPI. Today we are hosting a conference attended by people from 51 different countries across the globe—the largest number of participating countries ever." In her statement, Teigen particularly welcomed "our colleagues from Africa and the Middle East, for the first time you are well represented at the conference." The WPIC has evolved from a more academic model to one that reflects the influence of the national hosts. The women who volunteer to bring the festival to their own country ensure women artists from their region are able to attend in order to experience its potential for networking and empowerment, but the hosts also use the conference as a platform to raise awareness of their own most pressing concerns.

The representation from African nations previews the next iteration of WPIC, which will be held in Cape Town in 2015. But while the final day of the Stockholm conference had an African focus, the emphasis in Stockholm was on women of the Middle East. The Swedish host of the conference was Riksteatern (The Swedish National Touring Company) and the venue was Sodra Teatern, part of the Riksteatern network located in the Sodermalm district of Stockholm, but the two co-organizing theatres were Al Madina of Lebanon and Al-Harah of Palestine. Many of the playwrights represented at the conference face censorship and oppression in their home countries, and, as Canadian playwright Beverley Cooper noted in her report, the diversity of issues is both overwhelming and catalyzing (2).

As a non-profit and non-governmental organization, WPI is dedicated to promoting and assisting the work of women playwrights and to bringing international recognition to their work. This is done primarily through the conferences, which are largely focused on play readings. Over the six days of the Stockholm conference, ninety plays were read, written by ninety-two playwrights from forty-seven countries. For the most part only brief excerpts were presented, read by professional Swedish actors in the four spaces within Sodra Teatern. Each day saw four programs of three-hour readings, with three to five plays per program. Each program had a moderator, and time was allotted for each playwright to speak and answer questions from the audience. A playreading committee selected the plays from over six hundred submissions; the Canadian representative to the WPI management committee is Marcia Johnson, former chair of the Women's Caucus of the Playwrights Guild of Canada. Interestingly, of the eight Canadian plays given readings, several had Islam-related themes, including Talia Pura's *Cry After Midnight* (set in Afghanistan) and Maja Ardal's *Prisoner of Tehran*, adapted from the memoir by Marina Nemat.

Another way that WPI promotes women's playwriting is through presenting full productions during the conference. In 2012, this opportunity was tied to the Middle Eastern theme and to the Etel Adnan Award, an honour created by Al Madina Theatre and Riksteatern. The $5,000 (USD) award "aspires to increase the number of plays penned by women playwrights residing in Arabic countries" (WPIC website). The 2011 winner was Lana Nasser from Jordan, who performed her one-woman play *In the Lost and Found: Red Suitcase* at Dramalabbet, an independent venue close to Sodra Teatern, for two evenings of the conference. Nasser's play dissects the Arab language to uncover the roots of gendered oppression, juxtaposing her dense text with vibrant sequences of movement and dance.

All images: © Janet Shum / The cast of *Immigration Stories* by Hope McIntyre, produced at FemFest 2012

The winner of the 2012 award was announced on the second day of the conference, as part of a morning dedicated to the Arab theme. The day began with a keynote speech by Nidal Al Achkar, founder and director of Al Madina, who gave a mesmerizing history of theatre in Beirut and her own theatrical career, including her work with Joan Littlewood, her founding of Beirut Workshop Productions, and the struggles of her theatre today. She was followed by Mona Knio, chair of the Department of Communication Arts at the Lebanese American University, who spoke mainly about training opportunities and, like Al Achkar, emphasized the total absence of government financial support for theatre.

The final keynote was delivered by Sondos Shabayek, described in the conference program as "Egyptian journalist, dramatist, director & activist, part of the protestors at Tahrir Square in Cairo." Shabayek spoke passionately from her perspective as a young Egyptian woman intimately involved with the revolution and her on-going performance project, *The Tahrir Monologues*, which preserves and recounts the stories of what people experienced during the Arab Spring. Shabayek posted a call for stories, asking, "What were you doing and how did you feel?" *The Tahrir Monologues* has had twenty performances, in bookstores, schools, and even metro stations, and Shabayek hopes to collect more stories and publish them as a book. She stated that her goal is "to keep the experience alive and to remind us what we were finally able to do."

After the keynotes, a question and answer period was dominated by concerns over religious fundamentalism and Western media misrepresentation of the Arab world. For example, when Shabayek was asked if she would be allowed to dress in Cairo as she was dressed in Stockholm, both she and other young Arab women in the audience responded with some exasperation, shouting "Of course!" and suggesting that we not believe everything we are told by the American media. The value of an international gathering is evident: the rare opportunity to have personal, unmediated dialogue between generations and cultures. Finally, the 2012 Etel Adnan Award was presented. A poem by Adnan was read by Nidal Al Achkar, with musical accompaniment, and then Valentina Abu Oqsa of Palestine was announced as the winner for her play *Ana Hurra—I am Free*. Since the award had only been created to cover a three-year period, Abu Oqsa will be the last recipient, but hope was expressed at Stockholm that some other award will emerge to continue the encouragement of diverse voices in Cape Town.

In their reports on the conference, Canadian playwrights Wanda Graham and Beverley Cooper both made special mention of the opening ceremony and reception held at Stockholm's City Hall, in the spectacular room where the Nobel Prize banquet is held. For both, this lavish welcome was indicative of the support for artists in Scandinavia. And yet, as Cooper notes, "Even in progressive Sweden, a recent push to get theatres to commit to a minimum of 10% of plays produced be written by women was met with stony refusal" (2). This was the common experience that brought together such a wide diversity of participants: the marginalization of women's voices and the struggle to have one's work respected. The theme of a "democratic stage" was embodied through the philosophy of the festival, where each woman was given a chance to have her work presented, the opportunity to network and to participate in creative exercises, and

encouragement to think of herself as part of a powerful, alternative world-wide community of women playwrights.

### *TENTH ANNIVERSARY FEMFEST, SEPTEMBER 15-22, 2012—WINNIPEG, MANITOBA*

The first FemFest, held in Winnipeg in 2003, was the brainchild of Sarasvati Production's artistic director Hope McIntyre. The theme for FemFest 2012 was "Staging Identity," and McIntyre commented in the program, "When I look back at the 63 plays and readings we have done, the dozens of touring artists we have welcomed and the hundreds of local artists we have had as part of the FemFest team, it is pretty amazing." While Sarasvati has a mandate to produce "transformative" socially engaged theatre and to support emerging artists, it is not exclusively dedicated to plays by women. But FemFest is. McIntyre started the festival in direct response to the paucity of plays by women being produced across Canada. As a former chair of the Women's Caucus of the Playwrights Guild of Canada, and as one of the driving forces behind the "Women's Initiative," McIntyre is keenly aware of the disheartening statistics and uses FemFest as one means to offer more places for women's plays to be developed and produced.

FemFest is a national (and sometimes international) event, issuing a cross-country call for submission of plays to be developed and read at the festival, as well as presenting a selection of women's touring shows. In 2012 FemFest produced three shows from "away": *Women in Fish* written by Marie Clement with Rosemary Georgeson and Eileen Lorenz and produced by urban ink, and *Sonofabitch Stew: The Drunken Life of Calamity Jane* produced by Shameless Hussy productions, both from Vancouver; and *My Pregnant Brother* by Johanna Nutter from Montreal, which was offered on alternating dates in French and English. Locally created plays are also featured as both readings and full productions. The two local evening shows both reflected Sarasvati's community development mandate: *Empty*, a play by McIntyre about people who use the food bank, was developed over a two-year period through the city-sponsored program With Art, which pairs social services with artists; and the play *Immigration Stories* was developed by McIntyre with the Immigrant Women's Association of Manitoba.

FemFest also featured opening and closing cabarets, workshops led by the visiting artists, a "Bake-Off" competition, and readings of plays in development, in their entirety or as excerpts, interspersed throughout the week. Two playwrights from Toronto were also featured: Marcia Johnson participated in the "Bake-off" and gave a noon hour play reading, and Judith Thompson led a master class, lectured, and read from some of her works.

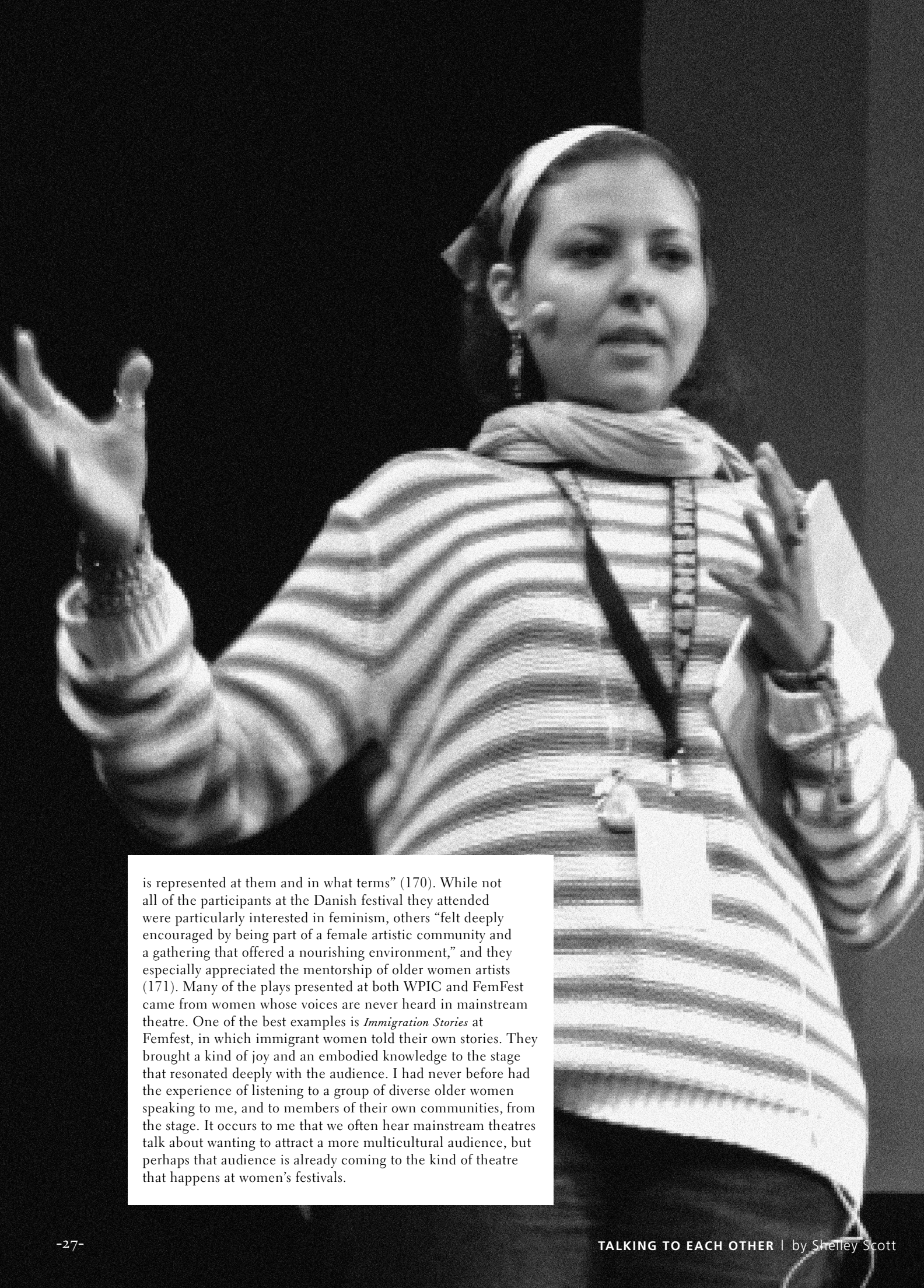
Originating in Toronto but based since 2000 in Winnipeg, Sarasvati is a registered charity with an active board of directors who do a lot of the promotion and fundraising; McIntyre writes the grant applications and does the programming; and temporary staff are hired through federal job creation programs. After twelve years of project grants from the various arts councils, this year Sarasvati received multi-year funding from the Winnipeg Arts Council. In addition to FemFest, Sarasvati usually produces one "main stage" play per year; organizes tours to schools, community groups, and even correctional facilities; produces a cabaret of monologues to celebrate International Women's Week; and hosts a fun fundraiser called "So You Think You Can Act?" with local celebrities performing in scenes. In the fall of 2012, Sarasvati toured Rex Deverall's play *Diss*, which deals with gangs and gun violence, to schools and community groups. In the past, most of their productions, including FemFest, have been held in a studio space at Prairie Theatre Exchange, but in recent years they have been based at the Asper Centre for Theatre and Film on the University of Winnipeg campus, where McIntyre also teaches. The Asper Centre offers FemFest a better size and the paid labour of students as both technicians and actors.

One of the tricky things about FemFest has been navigating its perception by the public. McIntyre has found that the use of the word "feminism" is not helpful in getting sponsors or government funding, and she has faced a range of expectations from audience members—from comments that the festival is not feminist enough to men who have phoned to ask if they are allowed to attend. McIntyre sees FemFest as being an edgy celebration of women's voices and a tool for developing and encouraging local women artists—to let them know that theatre can be an option for them. In programming, she aims for a balance of tone and as much breadth and diversity as possible, always trying to start dialogue and bring in a wider community. McIntyre's strategy has remained strong and consistent throughout the history of FemFest and seems to be paying off: attendance in 2012 set a new record, with over 1,500 people coming to experience plays by women.

### *THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S FESTIVALS: SOME EXAMPLES AND CONCLUSIONS*

For Winnipeg-based playwright and performer Talia Pura, her experience at WPIC 2012 was mainly valuable for provoking her into writing her play *Cry After Midnight*. She had sent a proposal for a script with three women on a bare stage, knowing that it would be appropriate to a festival setting; when the proposal was accepted, the play itself came easily, as it was based on the research Pura had already conducted as a participant in the Armed Forces War Artist program and her visit with the Canadian troops in Afghanistan. The FemFest experience was more useful for further developing the script: Pura had twenty hours of rehearsal time with a director and actors she had worked with before, she was able to do some important re-writing, and she was even able to arrange for a musician to play before the reading. For Pura, at least part of the satisfaction of the play is in raising awareness of the organization Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan. Hers is an instructive example, as a playwright who writes prolifically to fit what she needs, whether in a classroom or for a festival context.

In discussing Roots in Transit, a 2004 international women's theatre festival in Denmark, Elaine Aston, Gerry Harris, and Lena Šimi begin by noting that "theatre festivals are inevitably bound up in complex sets of relations, both material and discursive, that condition exactly 'who'



is represented at them and in what terms" (170). While not all of the participants at the Danish festival they attended were particularly interested in feminism, others "felt deeply encouraged by being part of a female artistic community and a gathering that offered a nourishing environment," and they especially appreciated the mentorship of older women artists (171). Many of the plays presented at both WPIC and FemFest came from women whose voices are never heard in mainstream theatre. One of the best examples is *Immigration Stories* at Femfest, in which immigrant women told their own stories. They brought a kind of joy and an embodied knowledge to the stage that resonated deeply with the audience. I had never before had the experience of listening to a group of diverse older women speaking to me, and to members of their own communities, from the stage. It occurs to me that we often hear mainstream theatres talk about wanting to attract a more multicultural audience, but perhaps that audience is already coming to the kind of theatre that happens at women's festivals.

In writing about the 2003 WPIC in Manila, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns is optimistic about the potential for dialogue among women at a festival: "In their local national settings, these artists would not be in dialogue"(333). She concludes, "An intimate setting and an atmosphere of camaraderie in these gatherings is an alternative to the professionalization of international festivals"(332). Certainly, there is little emphasis at WPIC on traditional markers of success—no mention of whether plays have been produced, published, won awards, received grants, and so on. Instead, as Hope McIntyre said of her attendance at Jakarta and Manila, the WPICs are all about women's empowerment and women's voices.

In her article explaining the value of women's theatre festivals, Lara Shalson uses "Nancy Fraser's critique of Habermas's notion of the public sphere" and her argument for creating what she calls "subaltern counterpublics." The idea of the "liberal public sphere" is always based on exclusions: those who do not get to participate because of their race, class, and especially gender, since women "have been historically excluded from public life" and relegated to the private sphere of the home (Shalson 228). Without having a counterpublic space—like a women's theatre festival—subordinated groups will have no place to figure out their own issues and aesthetic possibilities, no space that is not "under the supervision of dominant groups" (Fraser qtd. in Shalson 229).

Women's theatre festivals, as counterpublics, "run parallel to the dominant public arena" (230) and allow subordinated groups to develop their own counter-discourses. These spaces allow for discussion of issues that might be seen as private or dismissed as not having universal value, and instead allow them to be seen as having common concern. Both WPIC and FemFest have an integrated atmosphere, with a lot of interaction between performers and audiences—in workshops, for example. Because there are several performances a day, with events and interaction in between, performers for one show become the audience for the next (Shalson 231). The audience feels that the performers are speaking directly to them and that they have an opportunity to speak back, and Shalson believes this dynamic has the potential to create real change (232). Distinctions between theatre events, social events, and political events are blurred: these three cannot be separated, but must be considered all together (234).

In his work on nonprofessionalized theatres, Robin Whittaker has argued that a "populist notion of artistic creation is one that views art not as the sole property of career specialists, but as part of a wider domain in which art is producible and transferable between and across lines of specific training, experience, income, and life focus"(10). Whittaker's statement beautifully describes the kind of creative work being done at WPIC and FemFest, as professional and emerging artists, community workers and activists, students and theatre lovers of many kinds come together around a common belief in celebrating the diversity of women's voices. Far from being only a means to an end, these festivals are marvellous and all too rare occasions for women's theatre to happen.

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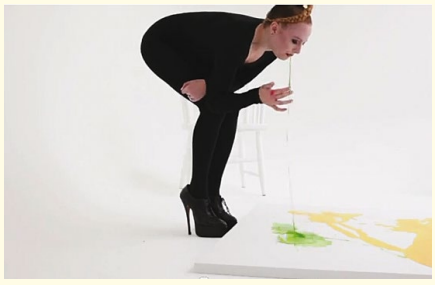


# "NO. JUST ... NO": ABJECTION, THE BODY WITHOUT ORGANS, AND MILLIE BROWN'S *Nexus Vomitus*

BY KELSY VIVASH

© Image of performance artist Millie Brown in *Nexus Vomitus*.

*Artaud and the Body without Organs*

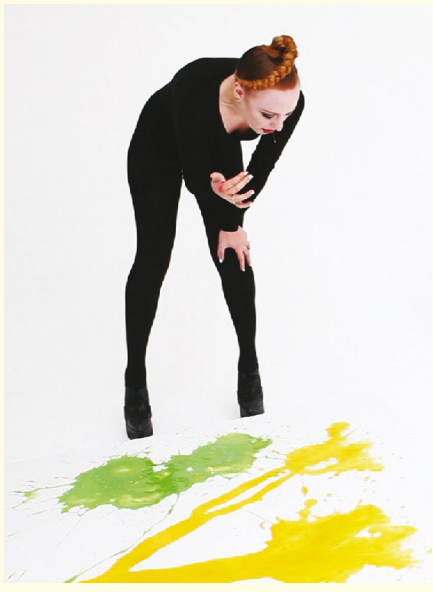
It is nearing the end of *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* (1947) that Antonin Artaud first refers to the notion of the "Body without Organs" when he writes that "Man is sick because he is badly constructed." He suggests that liberation from organs will enable independence from "automatic reactions," and posits that this will restore people to their "true freedom." His suggestion is that to exist, and indeed to dance, "the wrong side out" will be the ultimate goal of the body whose organs have been removed. Deleuze and Guattari absorb and further cultivate this theory in their chapter *How Do You Make Yourself a Body without Organs?* when they present the bodies of catatonics, anorexics, and drug addicts as those that have "had enough of organs" (Deleuze and Guattari 150). But they question the enforced "emptiness" of such bodies when the BwO is "also full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance" (150).

An iteration of these notions—the freeing of the impulses, energies, and desires of bodies; the confrontation of social restriction and taboo; and the embrace of the dissolution of the boundaries between private and social, internal and external, subject and object—can be found in works of performance art that aestheticize the creation of an "abject" medium and its subsequent euphoric expulsion as an artistic endeavour. Julie Kristeva defined the "abject" in her 1941 essay *Powers of Horror* as the disgusted and fearful response felt towards any substance or action that causes disruption to established mores of "identity, system, order" and that is positioned as "in-between" or liminal due to non-adherence to rules and boundaries, taking particular note of bodily fluids and food due to their traversing of the body's boundaries.[1] In the works of the performance artists mentioned above, however, the filtration of media—its transubstantiation into an abject fluid as an integral part of the artistic process—challenges common understandings of abjection and points instead towards the liberated and ecstatic body that Artaud, Deleuze, and Guattari describe.

*Millie Brown, the "Vominatrix"*

This transubstantiation is particularly apparent in the controversial works of performance and visual artist Millie Brown, known as the "Vominatrix," whose works feature Brown vomiting brightly coloured soy milk onto plain surfaces (often white canvas or white dresses, but also in one video onto a glass coffee table). Indeed, her most infamous work, *Nexus Vomitus*—a thirty-five minute performance in which Brown repeatedly consumes and then immediately vomits milk onto a blank canvas—has been described by Brown herself as a euphoric experience and one that challenges perceptions of "beauty and taboo" (Brown, "Nexus Vomitus: Livestream Q&A."). Certainly her statements regarding her experience of the performance confront notions of regulated desire and pleasure, as she attaches feelings of euphoria to the act of vomiting: one that more often occupies two negative spheres, as in addition to its presumed signal towards mortality and the dissolution of the subject it is also more often reported to be physically painful. Moreover, Brown's work challenges not only conventional beauty standards imposed upon women—standards that are consistently reified through images of women in the media, styled to pander to the male gaze (Mulvey 188)—but also notions of the female body as a collection of fetishized and appraised parts. Her art thus operates as





a gesture towards the de-stratification of the ideological structures that enable the objectification of women.

Brown's performance of *Nexus Vomitus* took place on July 10, 2010, and was live-streamed via video feed on the SHOWstudio website—a blog dedicated to the hosting of videos pertaining to performance art and fashion. In the piece, Brown enters the performance space clad in what appears to be a skin-tight black cat-suit and high heels and with her hair and make-up professionally styled. She pauses briefly in a wooden chair and gazes disdainfully at a blank canvas mounted on the floor in front of her. She then quickly stands and approaches the canvas, alongside which eight tall glasses of coloured soy milk—two green, two orange, two blue, and two purple—have been arranged in a line with straws hooked over their edges. Brown kneels to retrieve one of the orange glasses first, retreating to the chair to consume it before returning for the second glass of orange liquid, which she also swallows. She then squats in front of the canvas with her arms wrapped around her knees. After a moment of consideration, she straightens her knees and, keeping the upper half of her body inverted, inserts her fingers into her mouth and begins a process of induced vomiting that starts in short drips, but quickly progresses into long reams of puke that produce violent splashes across the canvas. With fingers appearing to be quite badly bitten and lipstick now smeared onto her chin, Brown returns to her chair to survey her work before repeating this process, first with the green milk, then with the blue, and finally the purple.

The setting for the piece appears to be a thoroughly sterile space, entirely white, with a small platform to the right of the canvas upon which opera singers Patricia Hammond and Zita Syme—also dressed and made-up entirely in white—sing a rendition of "The Flower Duet" from Léo Delibes' opera, *Lakmé* (1883). Indeed, the operatic singing of Hammond and Syme operates to cover the sounds of Brown's vomiting to the degree that the piece is relatively sanitized. While her act of expulsion still provokes a visceral reaction in many viewers, the performance minimizes the sensual elements represented by making the sound of vomiting almost inaudible and mainly relying on the video medium to disseminate this work. This filming creates proximal distance between performer and spectator that necessarily removes the element of smell from the piece and also eliminates any physical sensation of humidity that may be inspired by close proximity to this volume of vomit. Moreover, the vomit itself is somewhat cleansed within this performance, as the process by which the milk is transubstantiated into Brown's vomit takes only seconds and is included as a part of the performance. Indeed, as the milk is only briefly introduced to Brown's stomach before it is regurgitated as an element of her artistic medium, the milk retains its original colour and only undergoes a slight change in viscosity that can be seen as it is applied to the canvas. This state can inspire a dissonance akin to Kristeva's "in-betweenness" as the medium changes almost instantaneously from soy milk to a substance that is, at once, both food and bodily waste and is both clean (relative to other recollections of vomit) and grotesque (relative to common conceptions of artistic media).

The internet response to this work has been overwhelmingly negative, most often centring on what commenters have interpreted as an irresponsible and harmful attempt by Brown to glamorize bulimia.[2] However, Brown's artistic endeavour—despite

© Image of performance artist Millie Brown in *Nexus Vomitus*.

the violence it enacts upon her body—could also be interpreted as challenging the cultural norms and ideologies imposed upon women's bodies. Indeed, Brown's work can be understood to aestheticize the harmful behaviour that many women undertake to meet societal standards of beauty. In this light, her work provokes a consideration of the harm inflicted by the pervasive ideologies attached to these standards, both through their hailing of women to alter their appearances and their propensity to shame those women who do not. Brown's performance might thus aestheticize only a *symptom*—an immediately visible and provocative manifestation—of a more pervasive and veiled set of damaging ideologies. Her projection of colour onto a canvas aestheticizes the process of making something external to oneself beautiful, and by using such a visceral and painful method to do this, her performance foregrounds the labour required to create such beauty. Indeed, the external nature of the canvas that Brown decorates speaks to a Cartesian divide that emerges as a result of social focus on physical beauty, reflecting and the way in which the body becomes an ever-developing project that is constantly under construction as social standards evolve.

## *Brown and* Nexus Vomitus *as the BwO*

With this understanding of the complexity of Brown's work—as being much more complex than simply an enactment of the most recognizable element of bulimic behaviour—I propose that *Nexus Vomitus* positions both her body and the assemblage of her work as approaching Deleuze and Guattari's model of the Body without Organs (BwO). In terms of Brown's own body as a BwO, her description of this work as "both clean and cleansing" and her experience of vomiting as "euphoric" and "elated" (Brown "*Nexus Vomitus*: Livestream Q&A.") certainly speaks to a re-imagining of desire as detached from socially accepted models that, as Guattari writes, "cut [a person] off from his or her body" (Guattari 207). Indeed, if, as Guattari describes it, pervasive capitalist interests have invaded, segmented, and coded the body in such a way that physical pleasure is regulated and restricted only to certain corporeal zones, then Brown's expressions of pleasure as provoked by an act that emanates from feelings of nausea or distress, that produces a substance generally received by feelings of abjection, and that is most often associated with illness (whether by association with bulimia or otherwise), certainly can be said to attempt to dismantle stratifications of pleasure and to re-imagine social codes that divide the body into discretely functioning zones. Additionally, if these capitalist interests extend so far as to attempt to regulate notions of beauty, then Brown's aestheticization of this process and her decoration of the blank surface elicits a further connection between Brown's body and the canvas. Her decoration of this blank canvas in an attempt to make something beautiful with her bodily fluids—fluids so abjected that, as Grosz notes, their public expulsion threatens a person's very position in the social order (143)—confronts and challenges the assemblage of the "aesthetic," allowing for the experience of pleasure to emanate from visual cues more often coded as disgusting or frightening. Furthermore, the clear connection between the labour involved in Brown's performance and the visceral reaction that she has reported this work to have provoked in her audiences (Brown, *Nexus Vomitus*) can be read as an attempt to dismantle further boundaries: this transference of sensation from Brown to her spectators provokes a type of meta-performance within the bodies of the audience that creates a connection between watcher and watched, and may even provoke a re-evaluation as to the value attached to a nauseated response to her work.

Moreover, the BwO intersects with the male gaze within Brown's work, as Brown's dismantling of the "assemblage of the aesthetic" is reflected both within her reimagining of the value of that which is commonly considered to provoke feelings of abjection, and in her confrontation of the socially constructed ideal of female beauty. Indeed, her attribution of artistic value to her corporeally filtered media combined with an intricate interweaving of all elements of her performance (including, as I will discuss below, the process, the painting, the performance, and Brown's own body) provoke a connection between her challenge to standards of female beauty and her confrontation of what can be considered beautiful *as art*.[3] As Lynda Nead has noted, the relationship between the carefully controlled female body and the realm of "high art" has been repeatedly reified within the arena of European figurative painting and sculpture; however, in Brown's iteration of this relationship, the female body does not need to have its processes contained in order to achieve artistic value—instead, the relationship between art and the female form is conceptualized as one that emerges through the historical containment and regulation of *both*. If women's bodies have been historically presumed to be more porous and thereby more evocative of "abjection" than male bodies,[4] then the containment of their bodies within the artistic frame operate as a simultaneous restriction of their fluids in order that the image within the artistic frame be considered aesthetically pleasing. Here, if the female body and the artistic image can be said to have been conflated, Brown's work—as it radically de-contains the female body as an artistic act—serves to undo their outdated relationship in favour of a new one. While the presumed connection between restriction and beauty has, according to Nead, forged this historical relationship by its imposition both on the female body and on this body's representation as art, Brown's aestheticization of the abject act redefines the parameters of beauty—as applied to both women and to art—as *un*-restricted.

What is additionally interesting in terms of the assemblage of Brown's artistic endeavour is the way in which her particular iteration of performance/art extends the boundaries of her paintings as "finished products" by making the *process* by which the media for these paintings are created integral to the actuality of her works. Brown takes the process-as-product approach a step further even than previous practitioners of this style—such as Jackson Pollock—as she insists upon the visceral and abject filtration of media through her performing body as both a part of the creation of her artistic products and as an artistic product in itself.[5] The re-positioning of "abject" bodily processes as artistic processes gestures towards notions of the BwO in two ways: first, and as I mention above, it articulates a reimagining of desire by positioning the act of vomiting as pleasurable, and second, it blurs the

boundaries presumed to exist between Brown the artist, Brown's performing body, the artistic medium (here, the vomited milk), and the artistic product.

Indeed, the way in which Brown's performance *is* the art just as much as the finished painting, the medium, the transubstantiation of the medium, and Brown's body are the art, and also the indistinguishable nature of any crux, climax, or singular product of the artistic endeavour, suggest that the assemblage of her work is marked with a BwO as well. In *Nexus Vomitus*, for instance, Brown's body is inextricably bound to the medium as she corporeally filters it, to the process of creation of both the medium and the painting as she turns both into performance, and to the painting itself as she literalizes the common trope in "high art" of showing externally what is present "inside the artist."[6] Additionally, there is no clear central facet of this performance, as each of the painting, the performance, and the medium are absolutely pivotal to the work. The painting takes on a central role as it acts as a symbol of that which is being created through this work, displaying evidence of the medium and the performance. The performance remains central due to its unclear boundaries and its containment of the process, medium, and painting; and the medium remains central because of its visceral and aesthetic power as the signifier of the process and of Brown's body as displayed on the canvas and in performance. All elements here are wound together in such a way that the realms of visual and performance art, process and product, body and medium, production and performance, blend together, not only mutually supporting the artistic endeavour but combining to become it.

## *Conclusions*

The opening out of subjectivity as iterated within Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the BwO coincides with notions of the abject that suggest that subjectivity has historically been conceived of as contained within the body. If, as Kristeva and Grosz argue, the leaking of bodily substances signals towards the dissolution of subjectivity and its potential to "slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed" (Grosz 145), then the BwO can be understood to celebrate the corporeal de-stratification symbolized by the "abject" leaking of bodily fluids. Indeed, herein lies the incongruity between the two theories: while the BwO celebrates this opening of subjectivity, notions of abjection position it negatively, suggesting that the dissolution of boundaries serves as a gesture towards the death drive and the loss of position within the social order (143).

Brown's performance/art aestheticizes the relationship between the BwO and the abject in a number of ways. These include, but are by no means limited to, the positioning of the act of vomiting as pleasurable and cleansing; the challenging of the male gaze that segments the female body into a collection of discretely valued, erotic parts; the blurring of boundaries between Brown's body, the performance, the painting and the medium; and the de-stratification of the assemblage of the aesthetic that operates to re-imagine the notion of "beauty" both in terms of its application to female bodies and to their representation within the artistic frame. Indeed, performances such as this re-conceptualize the significance of corporeal abjection through a public execution and celebration of acts of expulsion, making the abject act itself one that suggests that the end of subjectivity could be the beginning of a movement away from the prescriptive regulation of desires and energies.

## NOTES

1 Kristeva's abjection both coincides with and simultaneously rejects Deleuze and Guattari's Body without Organs: while both theories centralize subjectivity as symbolically contained within the body, the Body without Organs decries bodily closure and celebrates free-flowing energies and subjectivities, while abjection imagines the violation of the body's boundaries as indicating the dissolution of subjectivity and signalling towards death.

2 Such remarks are typified in a posting from July 20, 2011, on About-Face—a blog dedicated to dissecting media images. The posting, "Millie Brown: Is vomiting rainbows glamorous, dangerous, or just gross?" concludes that Brown's performance glamorizes damaging behaviors and succeeds only in giving "an artistic allure to a harmful, destructive act." The attached comment thread tends to reiterate the perceived connection between Brown's work and eating disorders, and many attack her work as simplistic, irrelevant and "anti-art." Indeed, these comments reflect the attitudes found in comments on Brown's YouTube video and on other popular websites that have featured her work, including *The Huffington Post* and *Tumblr*.

3 A substantial lineage within feminist performance art of this type of aetheticized abjection inspires an interrogation of beauty as it relates both to the female body and to art. Examples of these include Carolee Schneemanns' *Interior Scroll* (1975), Valie Export's *<<Eros/Ion>>* (1971), and Gina Pane's *Le Lait Chaud (Warm Milk)* (1972).

4 Margrit Shildrick discusses this presumed relationship at length in her book, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)Ethics*.

5 Brown's particular style of the process-as-product approach bears some resemblance to Keith Boadwee's aestheticizations of the anal ejaculation of paint. In the same way that Boadwee's process serves to "queer" Pollock's hetero-symbolic ejaculatory method, Brown's style feminizes it by conjuring images of female beauty work.

6 This trope has historically often been literalized through the use of blood on canvas, as in the works of Jordan Eagles, Franko B., and Vinicius Quesada. Moreover, female artists have evolved their own gendered facet of this practice through the use of menstrual blood as a medium, as in the works of Vanessa Tiegs and Lani Beloso.

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# Revisiting *Agokwe*: Decolonizing Sexuality and Gender

BY JEAN O'HARA

Waawaate Fobister, a Grassy Narrows performer and playwright, won six Dora Awards with his first play, *Agokwe*, in 2009. His success led to a Canada-wide tour in 2012, with continued productions into 2013. Due to the play's success, much has been written about *Agokwe*. It has been a steep learning curve for the non-Native community, including critics and other writers, to fully understand this multi-layered play. As a non-Native queer theatre artist, I too have been in the process of trying to understand the meaning of "agokwe"and two-spirited. I had the privilege to work with Fobister on a production of *Agokwe* in northern California, and it is through our conversations that I began to comprehend Indigenous understandings of sexuality, gender, and two-spiritedness. In researching what has been written about *Agokwe*, I noticed that what has been largely missing in analysis of this play is an Indigenous framework. The numerous interviews with Fobister have also been an attempt to understand two-spiritedness within a mostly Western understanding. In this article, I will examine *Agokwe* through the lenses of Native Studies and the newly emerging Queer Indigenous Studies in an attempt to offer a clearer understanding of Indigenous relationships to sexuality and gender.[1] In my analysis, I will intentionally privilege Indigenous artists and scholars.

Generally speaking, sex and sexuality are/were not taboo in Indigenous communities. According to Makka Kleist, within traditional Inuit communities, "Sex was not only considered a physical necessity equal to water and food, but it was also regarded as a tool to help one's emotional well-being . . . it was a *necessity* to our sanity"(17). Kleist further explains that after dinner, the lights would go out and people would find a partner and have sex. The lights would come back on after all the sounds of pleasure had stopped and then traditional stories would be shared (15-16). Sex was not private but integrated into community life. People did not necessarily have separate beds, so even children understood sex as a part of life. Michael Greyeyes also shared this concept during a rehearsal of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* when he explained Cree people's relationship to sex. Daniel Heath Justice agues for embracing the more life-affirming Indigenous relationship to sexuality and sex: "Just as Indigenousness itself has long been a colonialist target, so has our joy, our desire, our sense of ourselves as being able to both give and receive pleasure . . . Every orgasm can be an act of decolonization"(103,106).

According to Tomson Highway, Indigenous cultures do not teach shame or guilt about the human body or its functions, including sex. In fact, these bodily functions are a great source of pleasure and humor. Highway states, that "in Cree, and in other Native languages, speaking of sex and the natural functions of the human body is not verboten. It is allowed. In fact, the very nature of the language encourages it . . . [sex] is not only the funnest, it is also the funniest"(39).

*"The state of sexuality in Indigenous communities has never been fully settled, never fully static or colonized, although attempts have been repeatedly made to give it that appearance."*

— JOHN G. HAMPTON

He goes on to deconstruct the Judeo-Christian genesis story in which Eve and Adam are banished from the Garden of Eden for consuming the forbidden fruit:

> So although in one language, humankind is forbidden to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, in the other it not only permitted, it is encouraged. That is precisely what that goddamn tree is there for, for humankind to suck from its fruit, and suck and suck and suck, thirty times a day if necessary. That way, your body is much more relaxed, if not euphoric, if not exhausted with pleasure. (40)

In other words, in the Judeo-Christian framework the human body was evicted from "the garden of pleasure, the garden of joy"; whereas, according to Highway, "there is no such story of eviction from any garden in the mythology of Indians in North America" (38).

Fobister breaks these dominant cultural taboos around sexuality through the character Nanabush's candid talk about sex and the body throughout *Agokwe*. Nanabush is all genders, both human and spirit, and can take on any of these forms at any time. In one scene, Nanabush discusses Jake and Goose's attraction to Mike and ponders,

> Let's see if Mike had the option between Goose and Jakey. Who would he choose? . . . But what would Mike want? Weenug or Dakai [Penis or Vagina]? Hmmm … I think Mikey wants it in the ASS. Yup, I think he'd definitely want it in the ASS for sure! Well, what real man wouldn't want a 'lil ass play. (11)

Not only does Nanabush talk openly about anal sex, s/he also normalizes the sexual attraction between Jake and Mike. Nanabush goes on further to state,

> Because I did after all asked [sic] God to put the man's G-spot there. (*laughs*) At first I thought about putting it in the middle of your forehead, but knowing men with such easy access you wouldn't stop playing with yourselves and you wouldn't get any work done. So, for the sake of progress I put it in your asshole, because I know how much you boys love to hunt for treasure. (11)

Here, Fobister subverts heteronormative notions by assuming men's desire for anal sex with other men in their "hunt for treasure." Fobister also mocks the colonial idea of "progress" and white Western notions of "civilization." Colonizing white men were blind to already well-developed, sustainable Indigenous systems and social organization. Nanabush/Fobister then singles out an audience member and asks if they would be willing to put their finger in Nanabush's anus. S/he instructs the audience member to not be shy and playfully requests for anal penetration a second time: "I like a little slap and tickle. From boy or girl my ass isn't fickle"(11). Nanabush, performed by two-spirited Fobister, embodies both gender fluidity and sexual fluidity in *Agokwe*.

Throughout the play Nanabush also embodies a bird, an emcee, a D.J., a referee and acts as the narrator. It is important to note that most, if not all, Indigenous nations have a trickster god that helps humans on their spiritual path. Tomson Highway is quick to point out that an Indigenous god is similar yet ultimately different in its orientation from the Christian god: "Within the realm of Christian mythology you likewise have this half-man, half-god hero figure who makes the central connection of your Great Spirit, this gentleman by the name of Jesus Christ . . . Ours is a clown, ours is laughter, ours is a good-time guy and basically one super-hero" (Brask and Morgan 134). *Agokwe* opens with Nanabush emerging from the fog as a bird with shiny red and purple wings: "You can see me, right? Of course you can see me. I'm standing right in front of you, flesh and blood. But the only reason you can see me is because I choose for you to see me . . . I am Nanabush. I am a trickster. I am the trickster, the trickster of tricksters"(1). The majority of the play's humour comes from Nanabush who is often quite irreverent, as revealed in the opening monologue: "Before you came in here, I was the shit head who spilled coffee on you at the office. I was the old man with the hugest boner protruding through his pants on the street. A moment ago, I was the itch on the ring of your asshole as you sat down and took your seat"(1). As Daniel David Moses has commented, Nanabush is "shifty and shiftless, as horny, as lucky, as funny, as humans" (110). Throughout *Agokwe*, Nanabush/Fobister personifies a traditional relationship with the body: one that is playful and uninhibited.

Nanabush also helps to reclaim an Anishnaabe understanding of two-spirit people. Two-spirit is a

relatively young word created during the Native lesbian and gay movement of the 1990s to establish a space for coalitions and activism that integrated Native identities (Morgensen, "Unsettling" 135-138). According to Brian Joseph Gilley, "Embedded with this movement was the desire to fight homophobia among Native people and to provide a positive identity for GLBTQ Natives based in cultural heritage, not sexual identity" (127). Ultimately, two-spirit people were being asked to assimilate into the dominant gay community of activism in which continued colonial occupation was left unquestioned (Morgensen, "Unsettling" 142). Beth Brant explains the limitations of the gay movement: "We have learned that the hegemonic gay and lesbian movement cannot encompass our complicated history—history that involves so much loss. Nor can the hegemonic gay and lesbian movement give us the tools to heal our broken Nations" (qtd. in Rifkin 234).

Two-spirit—unlike the words gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer—is the only word that incorporates an Indigenous understanding of gender and sexual expression while also integrating Native spirituality and knowledge. Some First Nations already have specific traditional words for two-spiritedness; along with *agokwe*, these include but are not limited to *winkte*, *asgayusd udanti*, and *nádleeh* (Fobister 2). In my radio interview with Fobister, he shared that agokwe men can be straight, gay, or choose to be sexual with only spirits. Also, an agokwe person may perform the traditional roles of both men and women. Fobister self identifies as both agokwe and gay. The word agokwe literally translates to "wise woman" and means that a man has a balance of female and male spirits within him. Through years of genocide—which included rape, forced sterilizations, forced adoptions, forced relocations to reserves (and later urban centers) and forced assimilation through residential schools—Native people have been taught to feel ashamed of their culture, their community, and their bodies, as well as their sexual and gender expression. For Fobister, part of his role and responsibility as a two-spirit person is to help create balance and healing in Indigenous communities through storytelling.

In the play, Nanabush/Fobister shares that the Anishnaabe traditionally did not show prejudice towards agokwe men: "The agokwe man would hold power and represent strength . . . they were known to be able to see with the eyes of both man and woman . . . [their] lives were devoted to the welfare of the group" (2-3). Later Nanabush visits Betty Moses (Mike's mother) in a dream to explain that her son is agokwe: "It means within the man there is a woman, isn't that lovely . . . not one spirit, but two-spirited . . . not one spirit but two . . . ice and fire . . . ice and fire Betty" (16-17). Nanabush appears again later when Jake and Mike finally kiss: "Not one spirit but two. That is the light that shines within both of you" (19). Nanabush also affirms the many great qualities of an agokwe man: " . . . because what man wouldn't want a wife who was beautiful and glamorous, and strong as a horse and who could be a hunter and gatherer in the bedroom" (3).

Fobister plays with the Native trope of the hunter and gatherer, pushing forward his pelvis as he says "hunter" and sticking his butt out and bending over as he says "gatherer." Through Nanabush's brash humour, Fobister disarms his non-Native audience, playfully exposing the dominant stereotypes while aligning himself with Native communities, who have utilized humour, including sexual humour, as a tool of survivance[2] for centuries. Hanay Geiogamah shares, "The Indi'n capacity for humor is a blessing. And I see it as one of the fundamental miracles of our lives. It's a miraculous thing that pulls us through so much" (301). Each of these moments is an act of survivance against the demonization of two-spirit people that was taught in residential schools and in the Christian churches both on and off the reserve. In fact, Nanabush has the audience actively participate in this resistance by having the them say "agokwe" with him/her over and over again, to which s/he delights: "Ooooh . . . when I say it I just feel so glam!" (2).

Through Nanabush, Fobister takes up the themes of colonization and the regulatory effects of Christian churches. He subverts the colonial imaginings of the "apologetic Indian" by boldly and loudly placing responsibility on the invaders, colonizers, and the Canadian government. He attacks Prime Minister Harper:[3] "It took 200 years for an apology and all they have to say is 'I'm SOORRRYYYY!!' And what do you want me to say? 'Oh, oh Mr. Harper, its okay, I will just go and find my little children's missing bones that's now part of this condo that just got built here"' (2). Fobister makes obvious the insincerity of the prime minister's apology, which contained no action plan for reconciliation or compensation to the Aboriginal communities for all the losses and continued generational trauma created by the government-sponsored residential school system. At the same time, Fobister notes how the Canadian government has continually profited from the death and displacement of Indigenous peoples, making their land readily available for "purchase." Andrea Smith contends: "Native bodies will continue to be depicted as expendable and inherently violable as long as they continue to stand in the way of theft of Native lands"("Not" 82). Fobister also alludes to the missing bodies of thousands of children who died or were murdered while forcibly attending the residential schools.

The sexual abuse of Indigenous children was another form of genocide that ran rampant throughout the residential school systems. Fobister's own family members are survivors of such abuse. According to Smith, "In the colonial imagination, Native bodies are immanently polluted with sexual sin . . . [and] because Indian bodies are 'dirty,' they are considered sexually violable and 'rapable'"("Not" 73). The residential schools also indoctrinated students with homophobic and transphobic ideologies. Mark Rifkin argues that "an organized effort to make heterosexuality compulsory [was and still is a] key part of breaking up indigenous landholdings, [and] 'detribalizing' native peoples" (6). The logic of the heteropatriarchy leads to social hierarchy, which often leads to violence against two-spirit people (Smith, "Queer Theory" 58). Fobister has had first hand experience of this learned social hierarchy: "I've personally experienced gay bashing on my rez . . . They (men) beat me up and put me in the hospital for three days"(Simpson 30). According to Craig Womack, "Native gay male sex is both much practiced and much despised in Indian country" (140). Fobister demonstrates the expected violence when the character of Jake expresses his sexual desire for Mike, stating that he thinks they both "play on the same team." Mike becomes defensive

and asks Jake if he is a fag (18). Jake responds:

> I don't know what I am. But I know you were staring at me at the mall, and I was staring at you. And I think we both know what was going on . . . And if you want to beat the shit out of me right now, go ahead. But I have to tell you: I like you . . . So go ahead, beat the shit out of me. It wouldn't be the first time. (18)

Mike is impressed with Jake's honesty and courage and is able to admit his own attraction, which leads to their first kiss. Their kiss is interrupted by an enraged Goose, who repeatedly calls Mike and Jake "fucking faggots"(19). The character Goose reflects what Deborah Miranda views as a survival strategy, in which "queer indigenous peoples [are] sacrificed by the larger native community in order to survive conquest and continued colonization" (259). Goose's last words—"Fuck you, Jake! You can just fucking rot in hell"(19)— demonstrate the internalization of the Christian ideologies that are often linked to heteropatriarchy. This scene captures "the dynamics of isolation and condemnation that haunt queer and Indian lives, tracing their potentially toxic influence on individual and collective self-understanding" (Rifkin 267). The regulatory effects of certain Christian churches on Native people's sexuality are far reaching, with the church's lessons of white superiority and the sinfulness of sexual desire, as well as the body shame taught through sexual abuse. These painful lessons often lend to complicated and sometimes self-hating relationships to one's sexuality and body.

The Canadian government and Christian church's efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples into white Western ideologies, however, were not successful. Indigenous peoples have always resisted the subjugation and regulation of their bodies. Two-spirit people were, and in some cases still are, honoured by their communities. As Beth Brant states, "The exorcisms that the christian [sic] church has conducted over us have not worked"(qtd. in Rifkin 279). Examples of historical resistance include a group of girls at a residential school who hid and protected a *nádleeh* youth from the school administration, or when a group of Crow elders refused to publicly parade *botés* (two-spirit men who wore women's clothing) in masculine dress (Morgensen *Spaces* 50). Two-spirit artist Fobister embodies resistance as he performs his play *Agokwe*, which honours and celebrates two-spirit people. His character Jake challenges Goose, who has been indoctrinated with colonial homophobic notions:

> You ruined Mike's life just because you couldn't have him and it doesn't even bother you? . . . There was something special between me and Mike and you destroyed it and I hope someday I can forgive you . . . And I don't care what people think of me anymore. . . . you can call me queer, fag, homo, whatever you like but in my heart I'm proud of who I am and no one can take that away from me. (22)

In essence, Fobister reaffirms and contributes to the work of two-spirit activists whose goal is to "remember who we are and that our identities can no longer be used as a weapon against us"(Morgensen *Spaces* 24). Traditionally, there was no sexual or gender minority in Indigenous nations; variations were accepted and embraced. Fobister shares this knowledge in his play: "Everybody had . . . a place and the Anishnaabe didn't waste people . . . they had enough wisdom to realize that there was enough room for more than two sexes in their world and so they welcomed every new agokwe born into their community" (3). Agokwe men had important roles within their communities; Nanabush states, "they were shamans, healers, mediators, and interpreters of dreams"(3). Fobister demonstrates their importance, as Nanabush explains to the audience the actual rituals held in Anishnaabe communities to determine if a boy was agokwe. Through *Agokwe*, Fobister invites both Native and non-Native people to decolonize their hearts, minds, and spirits to create balance and healing. We are offered an example of the Anishnaabe world view in which all life is honoured and we are encouraged to celebrate two-spirit people and the many variations found in the human community. Nanabush/Fobister's last instruction is for us to "act on" what we learned and she/he hands the responsibility to each of us to decolonize our own communities.

## NOTES

1 This analysis is made with the understanding that there are over 600 First Nations in what is now called Canada. Each Nation has its distinct cultural understandings of and relationship to sexuality and gender. In no way does this article address all the varied relationship of each of these Nations. This work is based on pan-Indigenous movements and Indigenous scholarship.

2 Survival and resistance as defined by Gerald Vizenor

3 On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Harper publicly apologized for Canada's role in the aggressive assimilation of Aboriginal children through the government-supported, church-run residential schools (http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649).

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## SAYING "YES" AND OWNING IT

I remember playing an improv scene in which one of the actors on stage called for a doctor. I entered.

"Nurse," he said, "get the doctor."

Once again, I was pigeonholed into a woman's "role"—of a nurse, wife, mom, princess, bimbo. I remember being so angry that I wanted to quit improvising altogether. I spent years toiling over these issues: Why would he call me the nurse? Why wouldn't he let me be the doctor?

Then it dawned on me: Improv is imagined. I had the power to change it. It wasn't my partner's job to *let* me be anything; I could do whatever I wanted. Possible responses were infinite:

"Nurse, get the doctor."

"You don't need a doctor, sir. Calm down; it's a routine flu shot."

But improv mantra would suggest that by not accepting my partners offer to "get the doctor," I would be *blocking*. I would be putting down his idea. And, as we all know, in a creative environment, negativity kills everything good. We should support our partners by saying "yes." Yes, yes, yes. We are told that the best improvisors say yes all the time.

But "Yes" does not have to equal submission.

Countless times in my early years of improv, I walked off stage feeling awful. I have seen this happen to many young female performers. An offer is made on stage—for example, to take off her shirt or get back to the kitchen. She says "yes," even though she's uncomfortable, because "those are the rules." She feels exposed, awkward, embarrassed. She thinks that improv will always be like this, and she decides to stop improvising. Many women performers fall away from our company this way.

One of my mentors, Mike Kennard (of the clown duo Mump & Smoot) says, "Whatever's happening on stage is happening in the audience." He's right. If I'm up on stage feeling awful, the audience feels awful. If I'm loving my ideas and owning my own body, the audience feels safe.

About seven years ago, I came to realize that the notion that improv was about pleasing my peers was taking me down a bland, narrow path—to the brink of leaving the art I loved. Improv was about expressing myself, and about being in scenes *I* would want to watch.

Regardless of "yes," anyone who would say something sexist on stage is, in my eyes, portraying a villain. My character is the protagonist, and the villain must come to justice.

"Nurse, go get the doctor".
"Yes, of course."
*Exit, re-entering with the exact same physicality and voice.*
"Hello, I'm the doctor".

This is me making a confident, empowered choice, and feeling good about it.

The reasons that women improvise are as varied and complex as the reasons men do. Some women want to use improv as a platform for stand up, some want to do genre work, some want to be punch-line queens. There is no single categorizing thing I will say about male or female improvisors—except that, from what I've seen as a director and teacher, men are more confident than women in their first five years of improv experience. But confidence is the foundation of attack and speed—which are attractive attributes in improvisation. If you don't believe in your ideas, then the audience definitely won't. That's why I think confidence building is a key part of the development of young female improvisors. I know it was for me.

People always talk about women's "style" in improv—their ability to support and emote rather than tell jokes. I don't think it's a style: it's societal conditioning. It comes back to the whole "boys will be boys" attitude. Men are rewarded for being funny and mischievous. They're the class clowns. As we all know, schlubby sitcom husbands get lovely caring sitcom wives just because they're funny. For girls, on the other hand, the focus growing up is on being helpful and beautiful. Many young female performers start their careers with their confidence less than sky-high. They don't want to look ugly on stage. They don't want to look mean. They're scared to fail.

The art form of improvisation is a vessel for our ideas. If we are stifled or scared and cannot express ourselves, then we are literally "yes men"—and no one likes "yes men." But once we own our ideas, then we own the stage. I spend a lot of time thinking about how to become a stronger improvisor. It always comes back to trusting myself—to loving my ideas, to making the scene fun for myself. With ownership comes confidence, and mine grows by the day.

Amy Shostak

DISPATCH

## MY MOTHER'S STORY: TELLING WOMEN'S HISTORY ONE MOTHER AT A TIME

We, Marilyn Norry and Jenn Griffin, are the creators of *My Mother's Story*, a project that invites women from various communities to write the stories of their mothers' lives and then weaves these stories—anywhere from six to twenty of them—into a collaged script, primarily, but not exclusively, using the writers' words.

Marilyn was inspired to create the project in 2004 after a conversation with a woman friend in which they spontaneously shared the stories of their mothers' lives. She began collecting 2000-word "mother" biographies from various Vancouver actresses, including Jenn. Marilyn asked the writers to stick to "just the facts" to prevent focusing on unresolved mother-daughter issues. She then held meetings where women read their stories to one another.

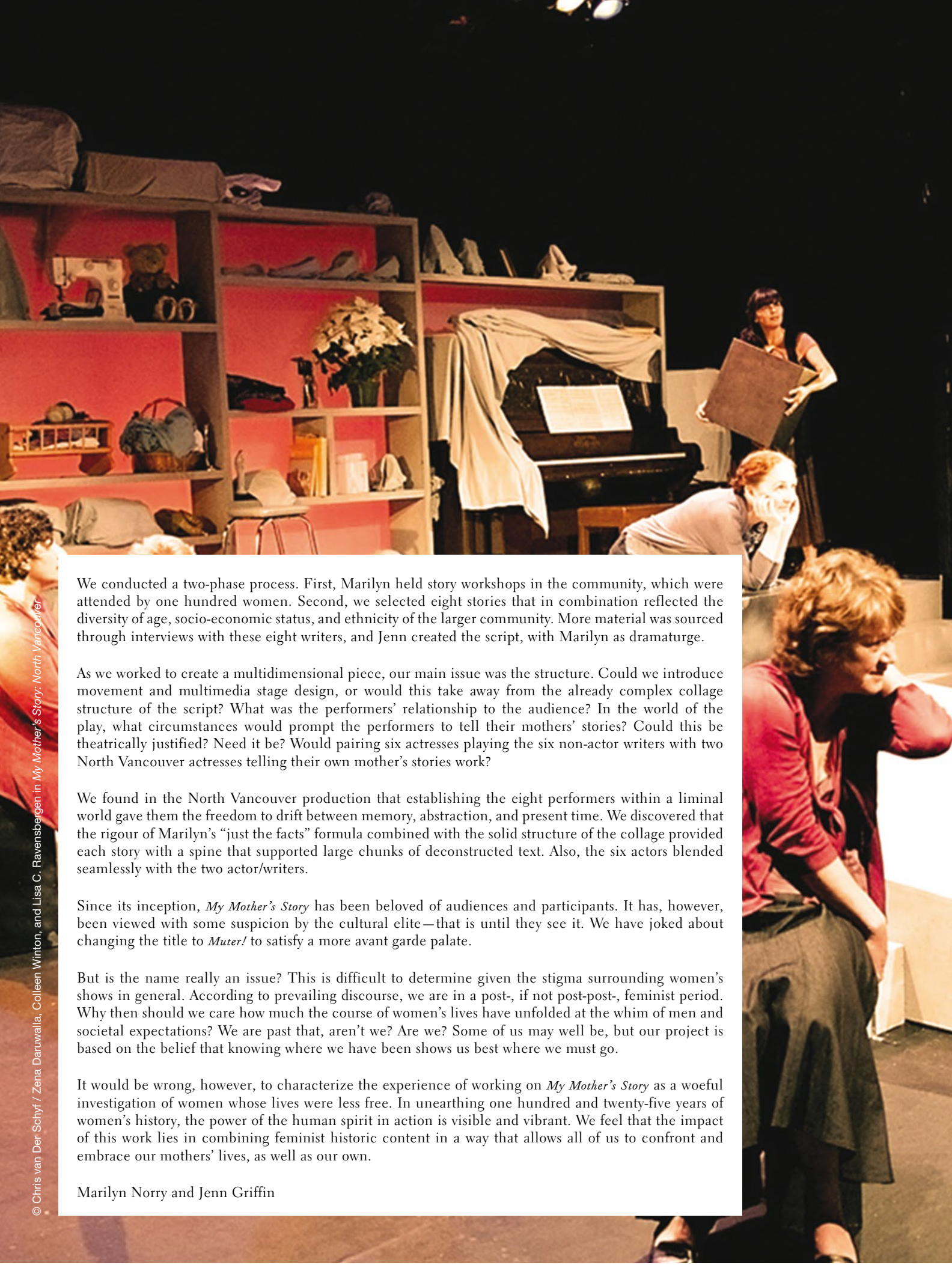
Jenn, inspired by the dramatic impact of these meetings, wondered whether these stories could be collaged into a mass theatre piece. She shared her thoughts with Marilyn, and Marilyn agreed to try it as an experiment. Since 2006, a number of collaged staged readings have been created—with some scripts weaving together as many as twenty stories—and performed by the actor/writer/daughters.

Our main question in presenting these staged readings was: Would this work? Could an audience follow a collage with as many as twenty stories presented together? Would a daughter's telling of her mother's life be compelling without being overly sentimental? Could a fact-driven piece provide content that would satisfy an audience?

We found, happily, that our concept worked. We learned that the simple presence of twenty women on stage speaking the truth of their mothers' lives was itself a feminist act. The structure of collage served to present a micro-historic cascade of twentieth-century womanhood, covering topics like immigration, racism, sexism, mental illness, marriages of convenience, and the impact of WWII and the Great Depression on women's lives.

The next logical question was whether the collaged reading format could be expanded into a fully realized piece of theatre. We were afforded the opportunity to test this when Presentation House in North Vancouver commissioned us to expand the project.

© Chris van De Scheyf / Colleen Winton, Suzanne Ristic, Donna Soares and Hilary Strang in *My Mother's Story: North Vancouver*



© Chris van Der Schyf / Zena Daruwalla, Colleen Winton, and Lisa C. Ravensbergen in *My Mother's Story: North Vancouver*

We conducted a two-phase process. First, Marilyn held story workshops in the community, which were attended by one hundred women. Second, we selected eight stories that in combination reflected the diversity of age, socio-economic status, and ethnicity of the larger community. More material was sourced through interviews with these eight writers, and Jenn created the script, with Marilyn as dramaturge.

As we worked to create a multidimensional piece, our main issue was the structure. Could we introduce movement and multimedia stage design, or would this take away from the already complex collage structure of the script? What was the performers' relationship to the audience? In the world of the play, what circumstances would prompt the performers to tell their mothers' stories? Could this be theatrically justified? Need it be? Would pairing six actresses playing the six non-actor writers with two North Vancouver actresses telling their own mother's stories work?

We found in the North Vancouver production that establishing the eight performers within a liminal world gave them the freedom to drift between memory, abstraction, and present time. We discovered that the rigour of Marilyn's "just the facts" formula combined with the solid structure of the collage provided each story with a spine that supported large chunks of deconstructed text. Also, the six actors blended seamlessly with the two actor/writers.

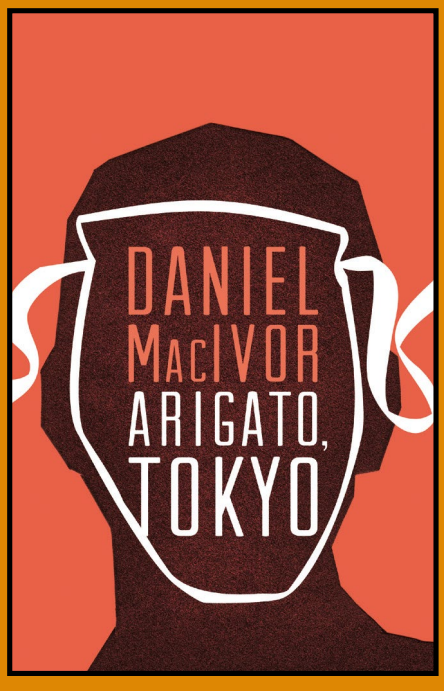
Since its inception, *My Mother's Story* has been beloved of audiences and participants. It has, however, been viewed with some suspicion by the cultural elite—that is until they see it. We have joked about changing the title to *Muter!* to satisfy a more avant garde palate.

But is the name really an issue? This is difficult to determine given the stigma surrounding women's shows in general. According to prevailing discourse, we are in a post-, if not post-post-, feminist period. Why then should we care how much the course of women's lives have unfolded at the whim of men and societal expectations? We are past that, aren't we? Are we? Some of us may well be, but our project is based on the belief that knowing where we have been shows us best where we must go.

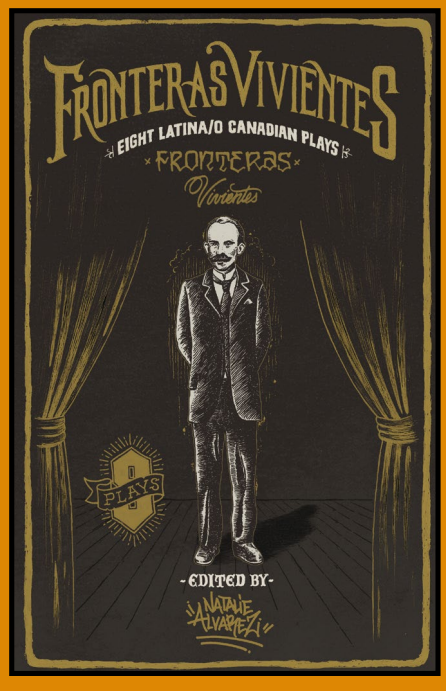
It would be wrong, however, to characterize the experience of working on *My Mother's Story* as a woeful investigation of women whose lives were less free. In unearthing one hundred and twenty-five years of women's history, the power of the human spirit in action is visible and vibrant. We feel that the impact of this work lies in combining feminist historic content in a way that allows all of us to confront and embrace our mothers' lives, as well as our own.

Marilyn Norry and Jenn Griffin

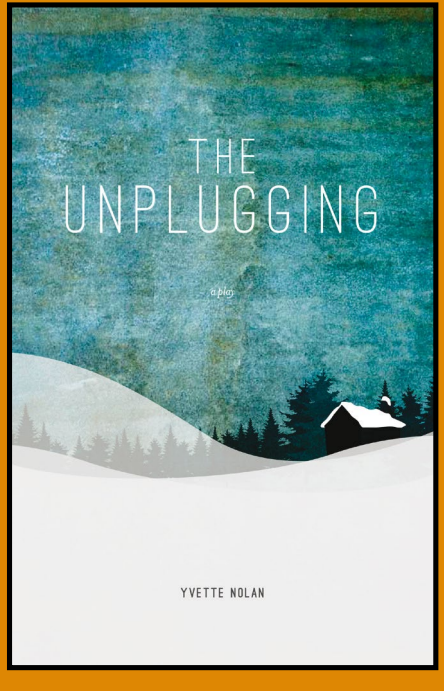

*THIS IS WAR*
**HANNAH MOSCOVITCH**



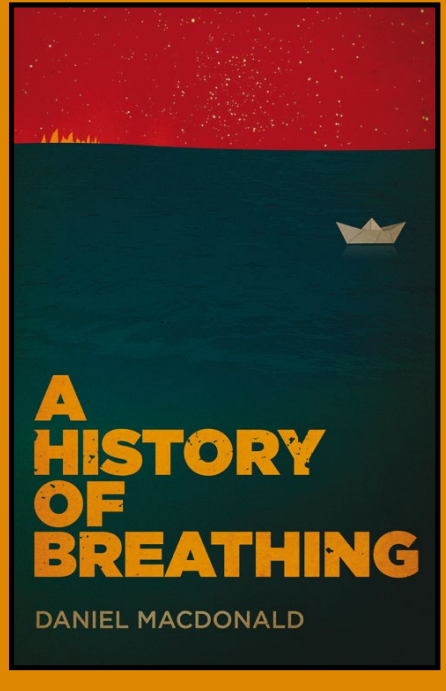

*ARIGATO, TOKYO*
**DANIEL MacIVOR**




*FRONTERAS VIVIENTES: EIGHT LATINA/O CANADIAN PLAYS*
**EDITED BY NATALIE ALVAREZ**




*THE UNPLUGGING*
**YVETTE NOLAN**

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