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| VOL. 11 NO. 4 | $6 |

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alt.theatre
cultural diversity and the stage
Vol. 11 No. 4

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

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alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage
is published quarterly by

Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

"Change the World, One Play at a Time"

COVER PHOTO
© Jennifer Williams Shaffeeullah. A performer at Trinidad Carnival in 1982.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested $157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.

Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 157 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

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EDITORIAL

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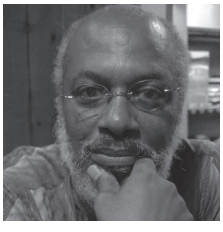
ARTICLES



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"Are You Scared?": ***PAGE 18-22***

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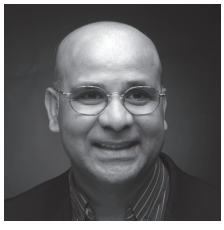

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DISPATCHES

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BOOK REVIEW

ANNE NOTHOF
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Editorial

Biculturalism and Blackface

BY NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

The year 2015 began with the English-speaking media coming together to call for an end to racism in theatre.

Well, to be precise, newspapers, critics, artists, and writers across the country turned their attention to Théâtre du Rideau Vert, Quebec's oldest professional theatre company. Voices across the country condemned Rideau Vert for their baseless use of blackface in their annual satirical year-in-review of news events, where in 2014 a white actor donned black makeup to play Montreal Canadiens player P. K. Subban.

White Quebec's history and ongoing reality of anti-black racism is pervasive, and there is indeed something distinct about mainstream Quebec's ignorance of blackface, demonstrated by the readiness to perform the dehumanizing racist act again and again. Theatre reviewers were unsurprised by Rideau Vert's performance: the *Montreal Gazette*'s Pat Donnelly stated she "almost didn't go" because she expected it (CBC News Montreal), and Kelly Nestruck of *The Globe and Mail* remarked that blackface controversies in Quebec seem to happen as frequently as every year or two.

Black Quebeckers, including many theatre artists, spoke up against Rideau Vert's performance. As Rachel Décoste put it, "The potency of blackface does not sting a nation unfamiliar with its own checkered past, including slavery, minstrel shows and legalized anti-black racism. But the afro-Québecois—Ils se souviennent. They remember."

They remember, and they worked to remind the rest of the province that the use of blackface on stage by a white performer is never an isolated act, but always functions as part of a long racist history of mockery and exclusion. Mike Payette, assistant artistic director of Black Theatre Workshop, describes the discomfort of attending the show, noting that he and his colleague were "the only people of colour in the 400+ seat theatre," and adding: "The theatre did not intend on including us." Montreal actor Tristan D. Lalla expressed his frustration at the lack of social progress: "Each time someone questions whether or not Blackface is even offensive in the first place, I feel like I've stepped out of a DeLorean." Comedian Eddie King describes how the public discourse that follows a blackface incident in Quebec can be as upsetting as the incident itself, when offenders and their supporters trivialize the legitimate concerns of those hurt by racism (Dunlevy).

The francophone company showed no reflexivity about their choice: Rideau Vert's artistic director Denise Filiatrault first responded to the criticism with a besides-the-point defense about why it wouldn't have made sense to hire a black actor for the one sketch, and then weeks later announced she would avoid criticism in the future by never again featuring black personalities in their annual revue.

Across English Canada, people were outraged. The performance and Rideau Vert's remarks were discussed in every major news outlet from the *National Post* to the CBC to the *Toronto Star*. Others weighed in on blogs and social media. Many called for apologies, promises, and a once-and-for-all end to the racist practice of blackface.

While signs of mainstream social progress are heartening for even the most jaded anti-racist activist, I couldn't help maintain some suspicion of the collective outrage coming from outside the black community and outside of Quebec. White English Canada's rage at the blackface incident seemed disproportionate—not disproportionate to the offense, for the act merits anger, in particular self-determined anger from the black Quebecker community—but disproportionate to the ways (white) English Canada addresses injustice elsewhere, particularly at home. There is a gleeful paternalism in the way that English Canada calls out the racism of French Canada. Perhaps it's born in still-extant competitive colonial mentalities, simple prejudice in the English Canadian psyche that imagines their French counterparts as backward and weak.

Or maybe the apparent anti-racist indignation is a delegitimization tactic, a manifestation of an ever-swelling Canadian neoliberalism that is impatient with Quebec's popular support for low university tuition and other relatively robust social programs. Austerity defender Stephen Harper is certainly selective when it comes to defining his own parameters of cultural tolerance and sensitivity: prior to the recent federal court ruling allowing women the choice to wear niqab in court, Harper declared in typical fear-mongering Islamophobic fashion that face veils are "rooted in a culture that is anti-women" and "not the way we do things here." But even Harper's xenophobia did not preclude him in 2013 from joining in the national wave of criticism of then-Premier Pauline Marois's proposed Quebec Charter of Values, saying, without irony, that "our job is social inclusion. Our job is making all groups who come to this country, whatever their background, whatever their race, whatever their ethnicity, whatever their religion, feel at home in this country and be Canadians" ("Harper on 'Quebec Values' Plan").

I suspect English Canada is able to chastise blackface in Quebec because, frankly, it's easy. Racism manifests differently in different (post-) colonial contexts, and in English Canada, blackface is a recognizable taboo. By far and large, we know that blackface is wrong. It is a clear, basic "rule." In English Canada, not doing blackface is as about as righteous an act of anti-racism as is not joining the Klu Klux Klan. In white Quebec, however, the relationship to blackness is different. One particularly disturbing example of white Quebec's history

of anti-blackness is the use of black oppression as a metaphor for English oppression of French Canada, an appropriation that both perpetuates and renders invisible the anti-black racism of Quebec. The phrase *White Niggers of America* was popularized in the title Pierre Vallières' book on the exploitation of French Canadian workers, and resurfaces routinely, such as in 2012 when the phrase inspired white student strikers to take to the streets in blackface—a racist tool employed for a progressive cause. Without question, understanding white Quebec's relationship to blackface requires distinct analysis. French Canadian racism is hypervisible when looked at through English-Canadian eyes, but white settler English Canada must not channel their rage at Quebec if it weakens their (/our) ability to recognize racism as it exists at home.

Not that English Canada has a clean record on blackface—far from it. A few years before and many kilometres away from Théâtre du Rideau Vert's 2014 revue, I performed with a different ensemble in a popular annual comedy show in the downtown of an urban centre to hundreds of paying audience members. One sketch in this show featured a white actor in blackface; and the audience and artists met it with tacit acceptance. There were some whispers amongst the cast about it being a faux pas, an unnecessary choice—but no real noise. The director of that segment, a person of social privilege and professional clout, laughed away any attempt at criticism. The actor in question quietly distanced himself from and expressed discomfort with the choice, but still performed it and said nothing publicly. The incident essentially went unchallenged.

I challenge English Canada, my fellow theatre artists in particular, to be as vocal when analyzing racism in our own communities and in our own work. Let us hold higher standards with regard to equity and representation. Let's have real conversations about race and equity in theatre, beyond the pages of *alt.theatre* and beyond "diversity" panel discussions. Another reason it is easier for those outside of Quebec to criticize Théâtre du Rideau Vert is because it is—geographically, culturally, professionally, socially—far away. The polite, conflict-avoidant mainstream culture of English Canada stifles constructive dissent, a phenomenon magnified in the world of working artists where opportunities are scarce and withholding grievances can be a strategy of job security. For many English Canadians outside of Quebec, the province functions somewhere between an abstract concept and a scapegoat for racial insecurities, a dumping ground for matters we are unable or unwilling to address in our own communities. Let's teach ourselves to understand the more subtle and insidious ways racism manifests in our own work.

Of course, we are not just a two-solitude "us" and "them" of "English Canada" and "French Canada." We are settlers and indigenous; we are white and non-white; we are anglophones, francophones, and allophones; we are immigrant and non-immigrant; we are many intersections of these. These complexities of identities are well known to us at *alt.theatre*, a culturally diverse English-language publication based in Quebec and with a national focus. Personally, as a non-white Canadian who happens to be anglophone only because of the patterns through which my ancestors were colonized, I cannot invest in any attempt to analyze racism in Canada through a bicultural French-English frame. When incidents like Théâtre Rideau Vert's blackface performance happen, and English Canada wants to respond, we need to move beyond the easiest methods of criticism and engage in anti-racist criticism that may also implicate ourselves and our own actions. We need to centre, and amplify, the voices of those most directly impacted (in this case, black Quebeckers). We must listen to the voices at the margin and remember that marginalization happens in many places and in many ways—not just those most easily recognizable to us.

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© Tristan D. Lalla. A performer at Trinidad Carnival in 2015.

PERFORM/TRANSFORM:

An Interview with Tony Hall, Trinidadian Theatre Artist and Teacher

BY JANE HEATHER

Culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence.

. . . Culture in under-developed countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom.

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 188, 232

About 35 years ago, Tony Hall and I were in a gang together. Tony is a playwright and actor, screenwriter and filmmaker, director and theatre facilitator. For eight years, I talked with Tony, listened to Tony, wrote with him, performed with him, and laughed and laughed and laughed with him, sometimes every day. We talked politics and theatre and laughed some more and did some skits together.

One of the scenes nearly got him shot. Frank Pelligrino was an actor and an anarchist wannabe naïf. And me?—I was supposed to be some kind of Marxist feminist theatre worker, but I didn't know the scene would end with De Beers security chasing Tony through the Edmonton Centre mall. Those cops had guns, and there was Tony, running up the stairs, yelling "Freedom! Freedom!" I didn't know they would hold him for hours.

Tony knew. Later he said:

> I knew I would be arrested or held, and I knew I would stick to the story: I am a teacher. I was in the mall waiting for my wife, looking at the De Beers diamond display, when this white woman in a fur coat handed me a pink plastic shovel, put a rope around my neck, called me 'boy,' and ordered me to dig her some diamonds. I was afraid. I ran.

They held him in the basement of the mall for four hours. Tony held his ground, told them the same story again and again, and eventually they released him.

I was the white woman in the Sally Ann fur coat with lots of rhinestone jewelry. Frank was my Italian security guy in a suit and mirrored aviator sunglasses. I stood on the steps, yelled, "You! Boy!", pointed at Tony, and muscled my way through the crowd of jewelry-browsing Edmontonians. I handed him the shovel, told him to dig up the diamonds, and put a yellow nylon rope around his neck. Then we were surrounded. They had that rope off Tony's neck in an instant while I argued with the security cops. I never did get to sing a chorus of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend."

As Tony sprinted up the stairs, yelling, with both arms stretched above his head, Frank and I were left standing with the shovel and rope; and the Free South Africa Committee hastily handed out pamphlets about De Beers, and South Africa, and apartheid. Then we dispersed to wait.

Tony maintains that despite the fact that he could have been shot, it was a vital action. It was 1979. Most people didn't know much about apartheid or its connection to De Beers. Because malls are private property, no one is allowed to pamphlet there. In those pre-Internet days, pamphlets were important. De Beers had a big diamond display in the mall, and the Free South Africa Committee wanted to get their information to people. The theatre was designed to distract so that they could distribute.

It worked perfectly. Tony didn't get shot. Some people got some information they didn't have before. And as a settler Canadian of European decent, I was educated about white privilege: I didn't even notice that the guards had guns—not until Tony was running.

© Mary Hall. Tony Hall and Jane Heather.

The most important thing is character

Tony moved home to Trinidad. I knew he was doing a lot of work with Carnival, including teaching a Carnival class to American students from Hartford, but I wanted to learn more. In 2013 I went to visit and talk with him.

The day I attended Tony's class, he had invited two guests. Previously in the course, Tony had introduced students to traditional masquerade (Mas) character. Both of the guests were in their 80s and had been playing Mas since they were children. Arthur "Fires" Stephens plays King Fancy Sailor, and Narrie Approu plays Black Indian.

These remarkable performers appeared before the students in their costumes, showed them their dances, and taught them some of the chants and movements they make when playing Mas. Stephens and Approu were completely in the characters and the characters were in them; the discipline and precision were brilliant. The central "play" of the characters; the elaborate costumes; the movement, props, and actions were all hinged to these wise, loving, generous culture keepers. They were wry and gentle. But the Black Indian was also fierce and ready to fight. Serious and hilarious. Sacred and profane. Earthy and spiritual.

I could see that this was decolonization. Darrel Wildcat[1] says, "Every time you do theatre you are decolonizing people" (qtd. in Prentki and Selman 21)—not all theatre, but a particular kind of community-based, popular theatre that incorporates popular cultural forms, indigenous languages, songs, dances, performance styles, and storytelling into theatre making. Michael Etherton and Ross Kidd[2] were instrumental in engaging people around the world in using "popular culture forms" —theatre and performance—to support decolonization and social justice. Both Tony and I were influenced by Etherton and Kidd, so it doesn't surprise me that Carnival form and emancipation were the starting points for Tony's current work as an artist and with his class.

J. H. **Tell me about the course. What are you aiming for with these students?**

T. H. We begin by looking at emancipation and slavery. What does emancipation mean? What did the Africans who came off the plantations with nothing to do experience? How was emancipation celebrated?

We examine the kind of masking that they remembered from Africa, and how they made what they remembered, a celebration of their freedom. We look at that and how the authorities tried to curtail that process of celebration. How the rules and the banning of certain Carnival activities created or launched other activities.

The Carnival today has two main threads: What we remember from African masquerade, and the European Mardi Gras. There is also a very strong Amerindian thread. The African thread is very different from the beads and shit, pretty Mas, bikinis, and so on. When people talk or write about Carnival, it's usually focused on European Carnival. All the stuff Mikhail Bahktin talks about, reversal and all of that, pertains to the European Carnival and less to the African-derived masque. The European Carnival King was this drunken, obese, slobbering guy; the masses play the king and the overturning of the social order. Trinidad Carnival king is an African king, and the huge costume he has on is an extension of the mask. That is something we only understand when we

© Jennifer Williams Shaffeeullah. Performers at Trinidad Carnival in 1982.

look at some parts of West Africa and see how people decorate their houses. There, the idea is you live in your art. At Carnival, we say you wear your art, you carry your art on your back, you dance your art. Our studies are focused on the African stream. What is the African content? How does it manifest in Carnival?

Now we don't remember all of it. But we remember some of it

J. H. **Where do the traditional Mas characters come from?**

T. H. In the Akan and Yoruba tradition there is a secret order, mostly men, who have a responsibility to manifest certain characters at certain times throughout the year. This is done to warn the community about various things. Let us say you and I are members of a secret order. You wouldn't know I manifest as an Ashes Devil; I wouldn't know that you manifest as kind of clown. On a Saturday morning, you look out of your hut and you see me as an Ashes Devil coming through the trace. You would immediately know I have a message, like a famine, and by appearing I am warning the community of what is impending. Or it may be less dramatic than that. It may be you are having some problems with your son and I know about the problems and I am coming to "manners" your son, I'm coming to discipline your son.

What we did coming out of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth was recreate these characters. Some, like Midnight Robber, bear some African traits and some American traits. Early Midnight Robbers were Texas bad men, so they are taking stuff from the cowboys. People who play Black Indian or Red Indian draw a lot from what they saw in New Orleans and what they saw coming up from Venezuela. Also they were infatuated by American movies. A lot of streams coming together, but the most important things were character.

At last count they have uncovered one hundred and forty-seven characters in the pantheon of characters.

It is celebrating freedom, but it's not really hedonism

J. H. **Carnival is advertised as "The World's Biggest Party"—come to Trinidad, party all night and all day, package deal, costumes, hot women, mad excess, and much drinking. How do you unpack that with the students?**

T. H. With the students, we say the emancipation energy is strong in the Carnival. When emancipation celebrations were curtailed, the African stream appeared. I try to identity how that stream manifests itself today, because it's not easy to see.

The freedom party that Carnival is, the freedom celebration, is sophisticated. The understanding of freedom that most people bring here is this is a place where "anything goes." Bacchanal. But it's not that: there are guards, there are measures, there are codes. That is important to understand.

This axiom of identity

J. H. **Okay, Mas characters have pre-slavery, pre-emancipation roots. How do the characters function as emancipatory, as decolonization? How are they political?**

T. H. In this society, there is difficulty in this axiom of identity and self. You come out of slavery and there is nothing for you to do. There is nothing for you. You're a vagabond on the street, a hooligan; you sing Calypso; you stick fight, you steal, whatever. Whole hordes of people below the line of respectability.

I asked them to talk about a time when they confronted some obstacle in their lives. Some moment when they felt: This is not going to happen, no, no I'm failing, I'm vanquished, and then some energy just—whoosh—and they get by. What is this? I say to them, If you could personify this energy, if at that point you turned into a character, what would that character be?

The British created the Crown colony system, where they would send governors and flunky civil servants out to the colonies. People felt themselves diminished by the presence of the British even though the British were not present. The British were in charge. So people held onto Carnival real strong because that was a way to hold onto their identity in light of the British Imperial presence. Carnival had been banned in the past but it kept breaking through.

So the business of identity becomes crucial—the business of playing somebody. We gotta play somebody 'cause we nothing, yeah? And what do they play? They play these impulses that we get. They see police and thieves running around; they play police and thieves.

These guys, at a very formidable and formative time in the culture and the society shaping itself, these guys identified archetypes for us. My argument is that even if all this disappears from the Carnival—it's all gone, we don't play any of these characters anymore—we have been given a form and a shape and a way of understanding ourselves, a way of coming to terms with certain situations and circumstances.

Seeing through your own eyes — a sense of being whole

J. H. **Could you track through your thinking over time about Carnival and how popular theatre and theatre of social justice fit into your work here?**

T. H. What I have insisted on doing ever since I left Canada is to really see through my own eyes. Because of how we were educated here, and then going to Canada—you are taught that there are people that matter and the job is to see through their eyes. So you talk like them, you think like them, you see like them, then you OK, yeah? So the task has been to see through my own eyes. I used to do these sessions with David Barnet and Floyd Favel.[3] I have always been grateful to Floyd Favel. We would meet on a Wednesday night and go into a room at the University of Alberta, right? I remember one night David saying, "Okay, let us present, each one of us, our theatre. What is your theatre, whatever that means, your theatre." And I remember thinking, What? What? David did some crazy thing, jumped up on a table. And then Floyd did his thing, kind of a strip tease [Tony does a version of a Cree song] taking off his pants. So I'm thinking, I have nothing, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? So I did a devil dance: [chanting] *Pay the devil jab jab Pay the devil jab jab*. Floyd stopped me:

> Floyd: Wait a minute. Wait, what's that?
> Tony: Some devil shit
> Floyd: No, no, no. I've never seen anything like it. That is your theatre. The way your body went into it, I've never seen you do that.

What Floyd pointed out to me is that there was an *internality* to look for that I hadn't looked at before. In other words, there was something *in me* that was manifesting through the dance, some essence manifesting, therefore it became important to deconstruct it.

Floyd indicated a possible journey, but I didn't know where to go. The thing that crystalized what I needed to do was meeting Michael Etherton. Etherton explained to me what popular theatre was, a form coming out of the people and their culture, with content that was emancipatory. Once I understood that, I could relate this Carnival to that, and it gave me an analysis of the Carnival. And that set me off to research African masquerade. Carnival is a Caribbean manifestation of the African masquerade. Then I could break down the characters and look at them in those terms.

I didn't know the scene would end with De Beers security chasing Tony through the Edmonton Centre mall. Those cops had guns, and there was Tony, running up the stairs, yelling "Freedom! Freedom!"

I started to understand how sophisticated this process of character was and the role the Carnival played for these original people in Africa, and how that then evolved into the Trinidadian and Caribbean Mas character.

You had people who played doctor, you had people who played police and thief, you had people who played nurse. Now, I looked at those characters when I was doing the research, and I thought, This is ridiculous, how is that related to African masquerade? Until I simply said: I am interested in what was in people's minds when they created these characters. I'm just going to go to students and say, These are the characters in the Trinidad Carnival. Which character calls to you? I asked them to talk about a time when they confronted some obstacle in their lives. Some moment when they felt: This is not going to happen, no, no I'm failing, I'm vanquished, and then some energy just—whoosh—and they get by. What is this? I say to them, If you could personify this energy, if at that point you turned into a character, what would that character be? Lo and behold, there were students who said things like: doctor and nurse.

I did workshops where people would find characters and put them in scenes and it would be a revelation to them. They would say to me, "I now feel whole. I now feel like I come from somewhere, belong somewhere. I used to always hear about all this 'mas' and all these characters and it just seemed like old stupidness. I am a bank manager. When carnival comes I don't want to see all that old crap. I want to play something that shows me as a beautiful black person, feathers and beads." The main thing they talk about is a sense of well being. A sense of being whole.

People have to understand how those characters shaped who we are and use those forms and formulations, because that is what they are there for.

My new play is called *Miss Miles Woman of the World*, because Gene Miles, the main character, a real woman who blew the whistle on corruption, created and played a character in the Carnival called Miss Miles, Woman of the World. I have always thought we should be creating new characters. Miss Miles is a new character, based on this woman. I would like to do a band of them, ten of them coming down the street.

Look me! Confrontation and participation

J. H. **You're describing an internal process, but there is an external performance as well. These characters interact with audiences at Carnival. Could you talk about that?**

T. H. The traditional Mas characters have particular props, ways of talking, and ways of relating to other characters and to the audience. So if you are playing Black Indian, you are looking for another Black Indian to fight or confront in some way. If you are a Midnight Robber, you are looking for somebody to call a Mocking Pretender; if you are a Baby Doll, you are looking for the father of your child. I call it instant social action theatre. You are at Carnival and you think you are just audience, but the character has a very specific endowment for you. Midnight Robber doesn't make you into the same person Baby Doll makes you into. It's a peculiar kind of street theatre; it does not have a big audience. At any given time there might be an audience of four or five as you move down the street.

When you play a character on the street, there is something beyond that playing. The character issues a challenge: "Okay, you reach here and you know all of this. What you going to do with it?" The character is a kind of threshold, a realization for you to go be free and for you to be responsible. Playing the characters, in the end, is a challenge to

help you to see something, bringing you to certain realizations, to clarify certain energies. Then what you gonna do with it? What action will you take?

Action. Being and action. That last part of what I call the emancipation cycle.

Emancipate yourself from mental slavery.

J. H. **So what's the question most on your mind now?**

T. H. What is freedom? That's the question. That question connects now to the whole Caribbean experience. Kwame Ture's point is that we all free and we always free, but in this dimension some people try to put some chains on us and we have to fight those chains. But no one can *give* us our freedom; we already *have* our freedom. Freedom isn't something anyone can take from you or give you. This is the beauty of Marcus Garvey, who in a speech in Nova Scotia in 1934 talked abut self-emancipation: "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery." Bob Marley got it from him.

© Tristan D. Lalla. Performers at Trinidad Carnival in 2015.

NOTES

1 Darrel Wildcat was a Cree popular theatre worker from Maskwacis, Alberta. He was the co-founder of Four Winds Theatre.

2 Michael Etherton is a theatre director, author and educator who has worked extensively in Africa. His work, both theoretical and practical, has influenced popular theatre workers around the world. Ross Kidd is a Canadian adult educator who applied Paulo Frieire's ideas to popular theatre in several African countries. He initiated a series of significant workshops in both the global South and North to strategize how popular theatre could be developed and disseminated.

3 David Barnet is a community-based theatre practitioner and professor at the University of Alberta; Floyd Favel is an Aboriginal playwright, actor, and director.

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IN THE OPENING IMAGE OF JES SACHSE'S *BODY LANGUAGE*,[1] THE ONTARIO-BASED ARTIST, CURATOR, POET, AND SELF-IDENTIFIED "GENDER/QUEER/CRIPKID OF MISCHIEF" ("KIDCROOKED") IS POSED IN A DARK CONSTRUCTION SITE. SACHSE FACES AWAY FROM THE VIEWER, LEGS SHOULDER-WIDTH APART AND HANDS CUPPED BEHIND THE HEAD, BARING THEIR[2] NAKED CHEST TO THE EMPTY MACHINERY. THE ARM OF THE EXCAVATOR IS SUSPENDED IN THE AIR, AS IF THE MACHINE WERE INTERRUPTED MID-DIG. THE IMAGE IS BOTH SEDUCTIVE AND DEFIANT. THE ARTIST'S POSE—SPECIFICALLY THE PLACEMENT OF THE ARMS CLASPED BEHIND THE HEAD TO PUSH THE CHEST FORWARD—

"ARE YOU SCARED?":

(RE)PRESENTING THE DISABLED BODY/SELF AND THE VISUAL WORKS OF JES SACHSE

BY ALLISON LEADLEY

is reminiscent of a pin-up model, and yet the sensual connotations of the pose are in stark contrast to the industrial background and the heavy machinery that towers above the artist. The image lingers on the screen for several seconds before sachse's voiceover begins: "since the day my spine was fused as a child, it has been resisting beneath my flesh."

body language continues with a collection of photographs—many of which appear to belong to the artist's personal collection—before a series of grainy black-and-white nude images of the artist slowly flash across the screen. At the one minute and thirty-seven second mark, an image appears of the artist kneeling before a simple backdrop. In the photograph, sachse is once again faced away from the viewer. The artist's chin is tipped downward and their head is obscured by the curve of the artist's right shoulders and spine. Both the pose and the grainy colouring of the image closely resemble the historic photographs of Florence Pickner, a scoliosis patient in the early twentieth century whose disease was documented in a series of medical portraits (sachse, "terracotta" n.p.). sachse's pose is similar to Pickner's in these images: facing away from the viewer with their curved back dominating the frame of the photograph. As the image appears on the screen, sachse confronts the viewer: "are you scared?"

As blogger "chelseam" notes in a 2011 post on jes sachse's[3] work, *body language* is dominated by the self-(re)presentation[4] of the body and the appropriation of the stare. Through sachse's narcissistic self-(re)presentation, the artist's work explores not only the ongoing collective obsession in contemporary culture with looking at bodies, but also how bodies, and in particular extraordinary bodies,[5] become embedded with meaning through this visual exchange. In an interview with Elizabeth M. Sweeney about *American Able*,[6] sachse stated, "I wanted to see [the Toronto public's] reactions. That's part of what I do with my own work. I'm fascinated by the way people react to disability" (23).

While sachse's work is predominately associated with the inanimate photographic object, the artist's self-fashioned display within these works—including the aforementioned *body language* and *American Able* as well as the 2010 photography series *The Justice League of Gawkamerica*[7]—are, as I read them, closely linked to both the theatrical and performative. First, many of sachse's works appropriate the images and aesthetics of cultural sites in which viewers are invited to gaze upon Othered bodies. These not only include the medical clinic (as in their gesture to the medical photographs of Pickner in *body language*) but also the freak show—a highly theatrical

performance site. Furthermore, as sachse's work invokes a number of metaphors, fantasies, and fictions related to disabled or Othered bodies—many of which emerged from such cultural sites as the freak show—their work functions within what scholars Josette Féral and Ronald P. Bermingham describe as the symbolic realm of the theatrical.[8] However, when framed through the lens of feminist body art and the subsequent work of scholars like Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider, the relationship of sachse's creations to the performative (that is, the notion that "identity is formed through iterational and citational processes" [Parker and Sedgwick 1]) and the performative potential of these works to reframe disabled identity become apparent. In sachse's appropriation and manipulation of this codified exchange of the gaze between artist and spectator, or between normative and non-normative subject, sachse's work seeks to make explicit the performative underpinnings of such ritualized exchanges (specifically, how the gaze shapes notions of "disabled" and "able" or "normal" and "abnormal").

(Re)locating Disability

In the most general sense, the term "disability" refers to a broad spectrum of physical, cognitive, and emotional orientations and perspectives. Within the context of this article, I refer to disability within the theoretical framework of the "social model" of disability. While the medical model defines disability as a biological absolute linked to the functions and capacities of the material body, the social model instead recognizes the social, cultural, and historical values and attitudes that, according to the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) activists, "disable physically impaired people" (qtd. in Shakespeare 38). As disability scholar Nancy J. Hirschmann notes, this privileges the able body not only within the physical environment but within social attitudes as well (as qtd. in Johnston 140). The latter is manifested in a number of contemporary stereotypes and literary tropes that include infantilizing the disabled subject; assuming the disabled subject is either asexual, impotent, or romantically undesirable; and casting the disabled subject as a figure of pity, charity, and inspiration, or one of fear, terror, and the monstrous. Moreover, in referring to notions of normal or abnormal, I am speaking not of a biological absolute but of a hypothetical socially constructed ideal of a "normal" body—or, to borrow from scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the "normate."[9] Furthermore, as Michael Rembis notes, the very notion of a normal—and the construction of maintenance of the perceived binaries between "normal" and "abnormal" or "able" and "disabled"—is intimately and implicitly linked to race, sexuality, and gender (52-55).[10]

Narratives within *American Able*

Among sachse's most popular works is the aforementioned 2010 series *American Able*. The project gained widespread media attention after it was presented on over two hundred and seventy screens in fifty TTC stations across the Toronto as part of the *Contacting Toronto: What's the Hype?* exhibit. It featured thirteen photos of sachse (some in which the artist is posed with model Dana Levine) that mimic the minimalist yet highly sexualized and provocative images of the L.A-based clothing retailer American Apparel. For example, one image in the series shows sachse, dressed only in athletic socks and black underwear, seated alone on a couch, with their knees pulled tightly against their chest. In the bottom right hand corner of the image are four small stills of sachse caught in moments of orgasmic pleasure. Above the four stills the caption—in the same black font as the original American Apparel advertisements—states: "Safe to say she loves her socks." Another image in the series features sachse, this time dressed only in tight black leather leggings, as the artist leans seductively into an open refrigerator with a large zucchini in their left hand. The caption—in the same font—reads: "Eat."

Unlike the stereotypical narratives of asexuality or undesirability that surround the disabled subject, the images that sachse and Norris create associate the disabled subject with multi-faceted pleasure—be it associated with food, masturbation, sex, or desire. As sachse stated in a 2010 interview with Michelle Diament for *Disability Talk*, "What I hope comes of this is that people can view disability differently and see that people with disabilities are sexual […] So many people are trying to come to my aid and protect me from being exploited and they want to prevent disabled people from living their lives." Moreover, the photographs seek not simply to articulate the disabled subject as sexy, but instead to express narratives of queer sexuality, desire, and pleasure—a salient distinction when framed through the lens of sachse's identity within the crip community and Rembis' writings on the implicit relationship between sexuality and gender within conceptualizations of "normal."

(Re)Casting the Gaze through Self-(Re)Presentation

In their 2005 publication on disability and performance, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander argue that there is an intimate link between disability and performance and that even though disability is indeed a rather banal experience, the day-to-day practicalities of living with a disability are ripe with theatrical metaphor. For example, the disabled subject routinely rehearses able-bodiedness in physical therapy clinics and rehabilitation centres (2). Here, the authors are alluding to the expectation that erasing or easing the abnormality will negate the source of spectacle. This, as both Sandahl and Auslander argue in their publication, suggests that the extraordinary or abnormal body is, in itself, inherently theatrical: the body's physical excesses or absences act as a point of visual intrigue and fascination that compels others to look.

UNLIKE THE STEREOTYPICAL NARRATIVES OF ASEXUALITY OR UNDESIRABILITY THAT SURROUND THE DISABLED SUBJECT, THE IMAGES THAT SACHSE AND NORRIS CREATE ASSOCIATE THE DISABLED SUBJECT WITH MULTI-FACETED PLEASURE—BE IT ASSOCIATED WITH FOOD, MASTURBATION, SEX, OR DESIRE.

Within this visual exchange, the visibly disabled body is cast in the role of the performer and the (presumed) able body[11] the spectator (2). These visual cues not only isolate the body from the normative framework of the "healthy" individual, but also signify an implicit narrative that accounts for how the individual acquired their disability. This narrative can be likened to what Garland Thomson refers to as the "stare-and-tell" ritual ("Staring Back" 335-36)—the daily, ritualized performance in which the disabled subject is expected to recount how they acquired their extraordinary body or account for their disability. In this exchange, the question of "what happened to you?" risks becoming synecdochal of the subject's identity in its entirety (334).

This theory suggests that to stare at the body is inherently negative: a process that implies a malicious, voyeuristic curiosity—a belief no doubt framed by contemporary reflections on the North American theatrical tradition of the freak show. Yet, as Garland Thomson notes in her germinal publication *Staring: How We Look* and her article "Staring Back: Self-Representations of Disabled Performance Artists," or, as Sandahl and Auslander later explore in the aforementioned anthology, there are a number of means of (and meanings ascribed to) looking at extraordinary bodies. Within the context of sachse's oeuvre, this is illustrated by sachse's collaboration with Norris on *American Able*. Elizabeth M. Sweeney's detailed interviews with sachse and Norris reveal that for sachse, the project was not only framed by the artist's own identity politics of being a visibly disabled gender-queer subject, but was simultaneously guided by irony and the fantasy evoked by fashion.[12] As sachse states in an interview with Julia Caron of *The Ryerson Free Press*:

> God. American Apparel is sexy. I dunno about Holly but I love their style. It's andro[gynous] and "basic" and hipster. Lots of lycra, lots of "your body as is" type of clothing. However, model and sales clerk wise? Tall skinny white people. The usual. The fact that AA is hypersexual appeals to me. The fact that the lens isn't really on an empowered body, is less appealing. Sexy sells. But why does sexy always intersect with misogyny? Ultimately, AA is a popular brand of choice for hipsters, many of whom are educated and/or are familiar with the provocative nature of their ads. American Able doesn't mock from the outside. It mocks from the inside. I like that. (11)

sachse continues:

> I hope that people see these ads in the TTC, laugh and put on something skin tight when they go home and stare at their bodies. It's like an invitation to a healthy dose of vanity. Why does fashion necessarily have to give people complexes? I'd love to be a model. I love designers and fashion, it's art on bodies. I guess I love modeling because I feel like I embody a piece of that stare in my own work. That "i see you lookin' at me" stare. I know I don't look like a stereotypical model, and I like my body, but I get stared at a lot, in a different way. So when I pose, I have the opportunity to engage with my voyeurs, or act indifferent about their gaze, or make them question the politics in their stare. Or seduce them. Or pierce them. It's really fun (11).

Like Garland Thomson, sachse not only posits of a number of means of looking, but gestures to the ways in which the stare can be appropriated and enacted within works of visual culture—specifically, what Garland Thomson theorizes as the notion of "staring back" (*Staring* 70-94).

This notion has also been explored by feminist body and performance art scholars, such as Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider. In Jones's examination of Hannah Wilke's self-portraiture in *Body art/performing the subject*, she notes that the self-fashioned, narcissistic display of the self is advantageous when considering the (re)presentation of alterity and Othered identities beyond the white, heteronormative, cisgender male, able body. As Jones argues, women are typically represented in art as silent forms for consumption—"conventionally speaking, men act and women pose"; however, the narcissistic display of the self allows the artist to deliberately invite and reiterate the gaze, wherein the artist can expose its "insufficiency" to "open the […] body/self to *other* desires and identification" (153, emphasis in original).

When sachse, as both the disabled subject and artist, deliberately poses their body for visual consumption, sachse disrupts the typical power systems between the disabled subject as the object to be seen and the able body as the privileged subject that dictates what or who is to be seen (as in the freak show or in Garland Thomson's "stare-and-tell ritual"). In doing so, the narcissistic, self-fashioned display opens up the extraordinary or Othered body to alternative narratives. In the case of sachse's works, these narratives include but are not limited to desire, pleasure, humor, irony, and fantasy (as in *American Able*).

Furthermore, within sachse's oeuvre, the self-fashioned display—or more specifically, the explicit body within these self-fashioned displays—functions to make visible the (often) unseen social and cultural processes by which bodies are marked by disability. The "explicit body"—a term coined by Schneider—describes the ways in which Othered bodies function in feminist avant-garde performance art. As Schneider argues, the explicit body in performance is "systematically stripped of its sedimented layers of signification" (2) to expose the implicit social, cultural, and political systems that are inscribed onto the Othered body.

In the image titled *Miracle Baby*, selected to promote sachse's 2010 photographic series *The Justice League of Gawkamerica*, the notion of the explicit body is manifested within sachse's visual appropriation of the infantilized, passive subject. In the photograph, the artist is seated on a small, wooden rocking horse. Clad in a nude band that covers the artist's chest, a diaper, a light-blue cycling cap with the brim upturned, and boxing gloves, sachse stares into the distance off-camera. While the boxing gloves and the term "miracle" in the title evoke stereotypical narratives that position the disabled subject as a source of inspiration and triumph over adversity, the diaper and the rocking horse gesture to the ongoing trope of the infantilized subject. In the photograph, the artist's gaze does not meet ours, and our collective staring feels, superficially speaking, voyeuristic. This is further emphasized within the very title of the project, as gawking indicates not merely a stare, but an open, unashamed stare associated with earlier, anachronistic forms of looking, such as the freak show or the medical lecture (both of which were instrumental

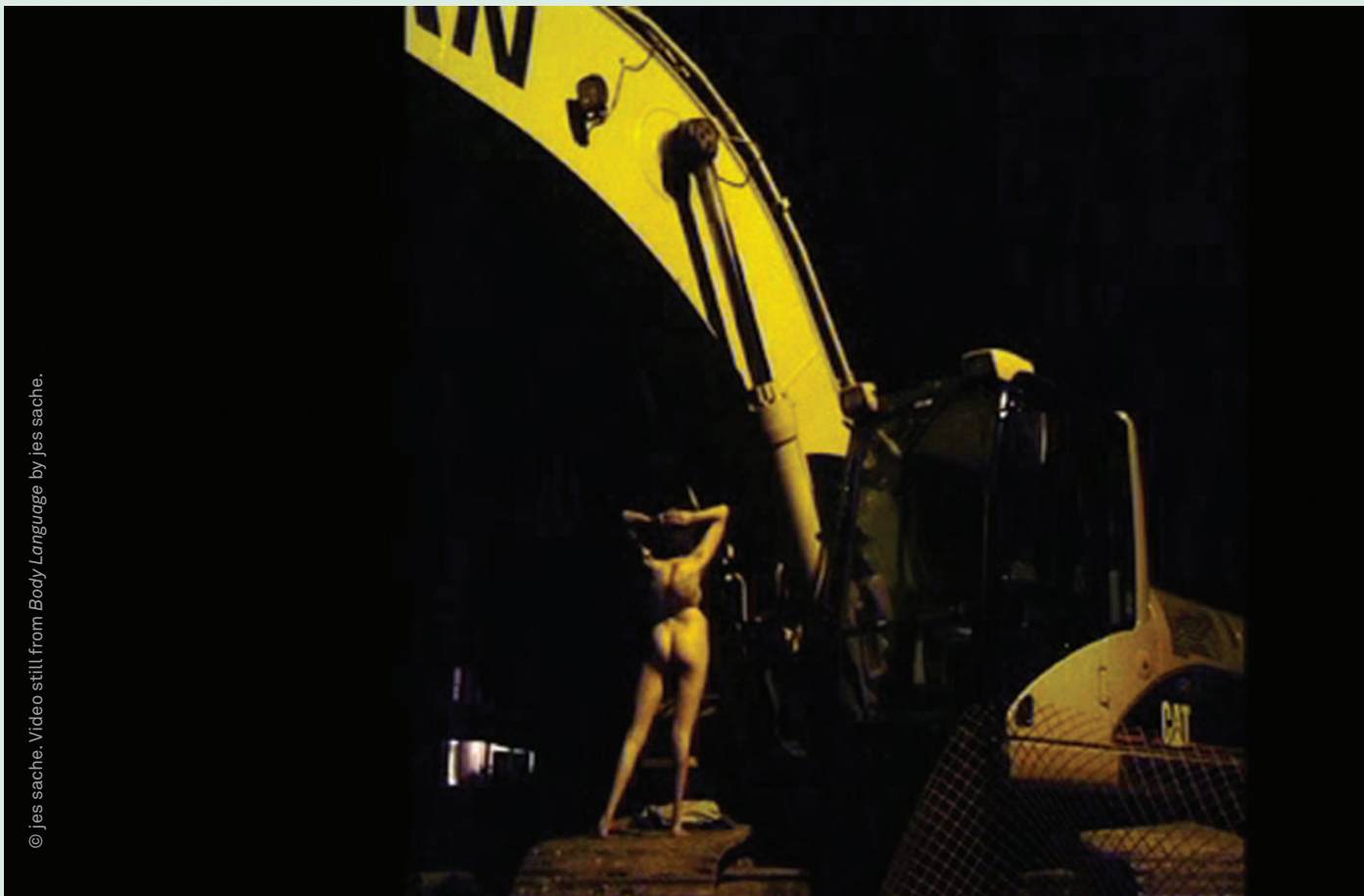
in perpetuating the very stereotypes of cultural, social, and biological inferiority the image evokes). By provoking the voyeuristic gaze of the freak show and aligning this stare with the visual markers of infantilization and passivity, sachse literalizes the power of this visual exchange to lay bare the very processes by which the body is not only marked as disabled, but is rendered culturally, socially, and biologically inferior.

Throughout sachse's work, humour, parody, irony, homage/subversion, and self-fashioned (re)presentation continually reemerge as strategic interventions through which the artist challenges negative preconceptions surrounding the disabled subject. Similarly, sachse's works are focused on a number of recurring narratives that include but are not limited to sexuality, desire, and sexual and political agency. While works such as *body language*, *American Able*, or *Miracle Baby* are more readily classified as inanimate visual works (as opposed to performance), sachse's creations directly engage with both the theatrical (as in sachse's appropriation and subversion of the numerous metaphors and tropes that surround disability) and the performative (specifically the daily performative processes—such as those enacted in looking—that inscribe and embed bodies with the claim of disabled or Other). Thus sachse's works not only reframe contemporary narratives of disability, they also seek to literalize the social, political, and political processes that both inscribe and promulgate these negative stereotypes that surround the visibly different or Othered body.

Conclusions

As Peggy Phelan notes in her 1993 publication *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, the act of self-(re)presentation "always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. [. . .] The 'excess' meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly" (2). Thus, in the same way that sachse's works resist a single narrative of disability (and, as demonstrated by the varied responses to *American Able*, can even simultaneously invoke seemingly contesting narratives or ideas), the very laws that govern self-(re)presentation make this artistic tool particularly advantageous in seeking to enact political change.[13] As disability scholars are now lobbying for what Kirsty Johnston describes as a more "nuanced ontology of embodiment" (11) in articulating disabled subjectivity, this notion of self-representation and the performative labour it enacts (as seen in sachse's work) appear increasingly lucrative to the expression of this more nuanced disabled subjectivity and identity.

I KNOW I DON'T LOOK LIKE A STEREOTYPICAL MODEL, AND I LIKE MY BODY, BUT I GET STARED AT A LOT, IN A DIFFERENT WAY. SO WHEN I POSE, I HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE WITH MY VOYEURS, OR ACT INDIFFERENT ABOUT THEIR GAZE, OR MAKE THEM QUESTION THE POLITICS IN THEIR STARE. OR SEDUCE THEM. OR PIERCE THEM. IT'S REALLY FUN.



© jes sachse. Video still from *Body Language* by jes sachse.

NOTES

1 *body language* is a screen-based piece with original text by sachse, first presented as part of Envision New Meanings of Disability and Difference. The project was part of a larger arts-based disability workshop in which women living with a variety of disabilities and physical differences documented images related to self-representation as a means of articulating their individual experiences with disability and difference ("En-vi-sion").

2 As sachse identifies as gender-queer, this paper will use the gender-neutral pronoun "their."

3 As sachse chooses to eschew capitalization—demonstrated by sachse's blog and the artist's preferred spelling of their name—this article will reflect this preference.

4 In the same way that re-performance destabilizes conceptualizations of liveliness in the performance archive, performance documentation, and performances based on the performance archive (issues pertinent to the discussion of sachse), I use (re) presentation to encapsulate the notion that the construction and presentation of the self is not an entirely conspicuous process. Regarding disabled subjectivity, I argue that the notion of (re)presentation separates disabled subjectivity and identity from the overriding assumption that disability is an innate, biological concept rather than a social, political, and cultural construction.

5 I borrow this term from Rosemarie Garland Thomson's watershed publication *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Disability in American Culture and Literature*. The notion of the "extraordinary body" is particularly advantageous in theorizing about visually different or Othered bodies, as the term manages to sidestep the negative connotations of biological lack or failure associated with the standard, medicalized conceptualization of disability. Garland Thomson's term, as I read it, not only is more closely aligned with the social model of disability (which envisions a hypothetical norm in which bodies are measured through and against), but the connotations of hyper ability or mastery associated with the exceptional (re)frame the outlying body through a much more positive and productive lens.

6 *American Able* was a collaborative series developed between 2008 and 2010 by sachse and photographer Holly Norris. The project was featured in 2010 as part of the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival as part of the *Contacting Toronto: What's the Hype?* series.

7 The Justice League of Gawkamerica was featured in the same 2010 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.

8 Féral and Bermingham define the theatrical and symbolic realm (and its maintenance) as a "*process* [emphasis in original text] that has to do with a 'gaze' that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other, from which fiction can emerge" (97).

9 Garland Thomson defines the normate as "the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries [and] is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants the them" (*Extraordinary Bodies* 8).

10 Michael Rembis draws parallels between the extraordinary body's inability to fulfill the hypothetical ideal of the normate and Judith Butler's notion of the heterosexual matrix: "[T]he inability to perform gender and sexuality in a way that meets dominant social expectations is seen as an intrinsic limitation" (52). Rembis theorizes that while gender, ability, and sexuality are "inextricably interwoven" (52), they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Thus, when one speaks of "normal," one must take into account not only ability, but also the assumed cis male, heterosexual assumptions implicitly linked to this conceptualization of the "normal" body or subject.

11 Sandahl and Auslander note that these so-called "passers by" are not exclusively or necessarily able-bodied.

12 Sweeney details the numerous readings (and mis-readings) of the *American Able* project and contextualizes these varied responses through detailed analysis and interviews with the artists. Sweeney raises important questions not only with regard to the critical response to sachse's work (in particular, within popular media and publication) but about the role of framing, the curatorial process, appropriation, and collaboration in the project's reception by audiences and sachse alike. Sweeney's interview is the most detailed historiography of the project to date.

13 As Phelan is careful to note, however, rarely is this political change enacted in a linear fashion.

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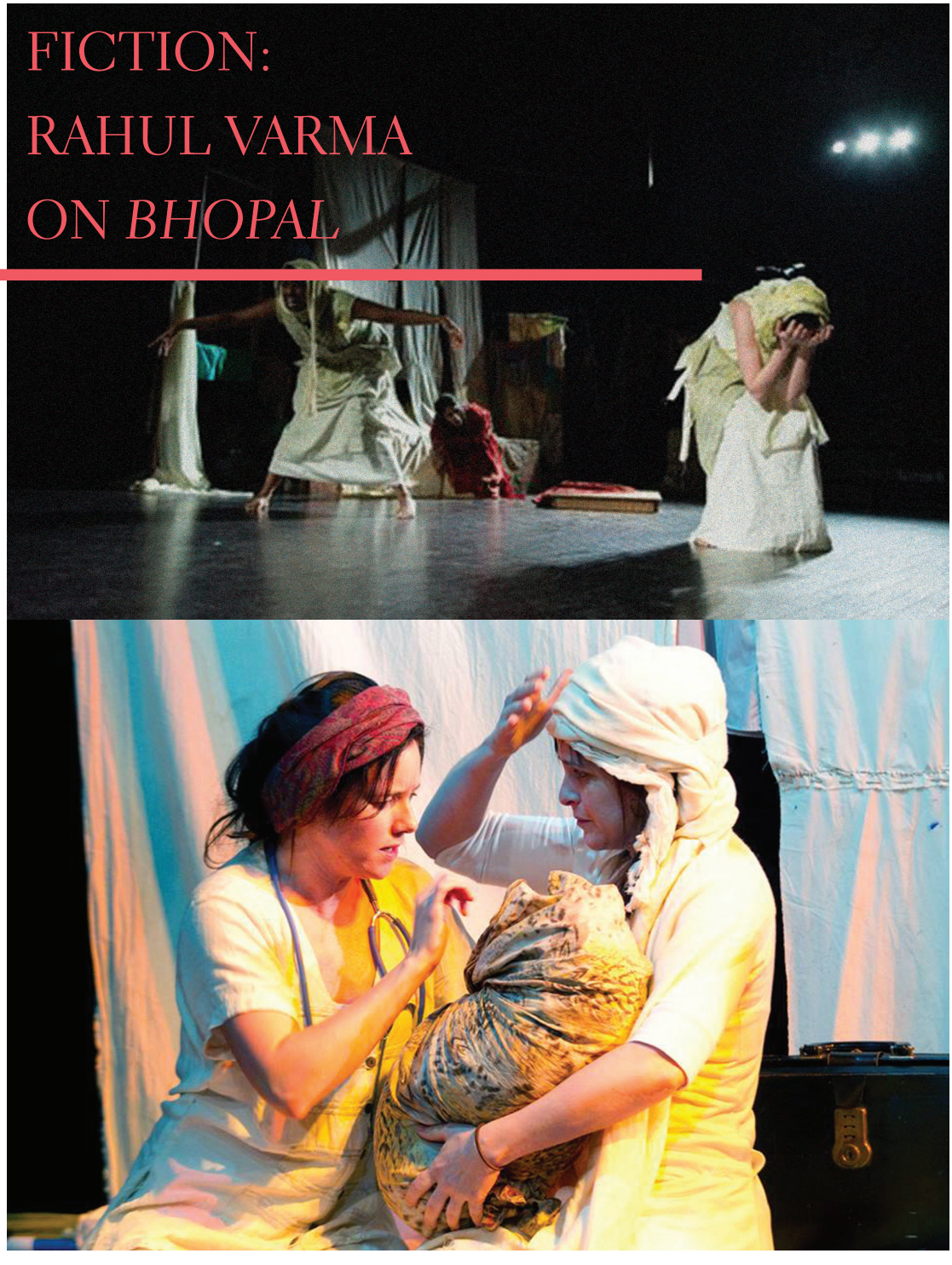
EXPOSING HEGEMONY THROUGH FICTION: RAHUL VARMA ON *BHOPAL*



© Julius Adama. The cast of Teesri Duniya Theatre's production of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*.

BY DESPINA ARTENIE

In January 2014, Teesri Duniya Theatre remounted one of Rahul Varma's most compelling works: *Bhopal*. The play centres on the experiences of the people involved in the 1984 industrial disaster that took place in in the eponymous Indian city. Its aftermath continues to be felt to this day. *Bhopal* presents a fictional story that is informed by multiple sources: medical research, verbatim statements, as well as a documentary that features the image of Zarina, an infant killed by the chemical pollution. Varma's impulse to tell the story of the voiceless child was the impetus behind his play. He wanted to create a story in which the political forces that caused the incident were brought forward through the experience of those caught up in the catastrophe. In order to tell the story of the Zarina, Varma stepped away from the conventions of testimonial and documentary theatre to craft a narrative that addressed the incident from multiple angles.

How can theatre tell the stories of the voiceless and expose unequal power relations without inscribing "the Other" in a fixed location, and without appealing to pathos at the expense of a critical view of what is presented on stage? Julie Salverson's notion of the container is useful in addressing this concern. Her work points to the fact that the potential for political intervention in theatre such as Varma's *Bhopal* rests outside the confines of "authentic" truths presented by testimonies. Instead, fiction allows for the creation of theatrical images that offer the necessary space for critical thinking.

Salverson entreats that theatre involving trauma and violence should "set up conditions of reception that will urge and allow the participants and the eventual audience to be affected and changed by what they hear. A climate of witnessing thus involves not only listening to someone's story, but allowing our attitudes and behaviours to be changed by it" (Salverson 183). This requires a more complex relationship than the duality of oppressor/oppressed because it requires those watching to interrogate themselves against what is presented in the play. Thus, the centre cannot remain distinct from the margins. For Salverson, this is done by creating a distance between the audience and the "authentic" truths displayed by the performers. She calls the fixation on authentic truths the "lie of the literal":

> This idealization of "authenticity" often happens at the expense of aesthetics or theatrical form . . . Yet this overemphasis upon a single, authentic story does not allow for sufficient complexity, nuance, and multiple points of entry. Such a story may remain either outside the experience of the listener, as the exotic and impenetrable but vicariously viewed "other"; or, it will be collapsed and assimilated by the listener as "just like me." (Salverson 184)

For these reasons, she argues in favour of the containment of information and experience; for the creation of a container during the process of creation and a "gap" during performance. The purpose of the container is to create a space outside reality where multiple truths can be explored. In the container, authentic truths and fiction meet in order to produce a story meant for performance. It protects performers from the burden of showcasing themselves as the "real" subject of performance, and enables the audience to witness the act as a work of theatre — and this theatricality is required for a play to be effective, artistically and politically. The container creates images allowing "theatre space to hold contradictory material without insisting upon its resolution. If successful, such an image permits 'self-othering' . . . allowing the speaker to see trauma as 'outside herself'" (187). Consequently, the audience is stirred towards engaging with the images created rather than with the distinct person identified as "Other."

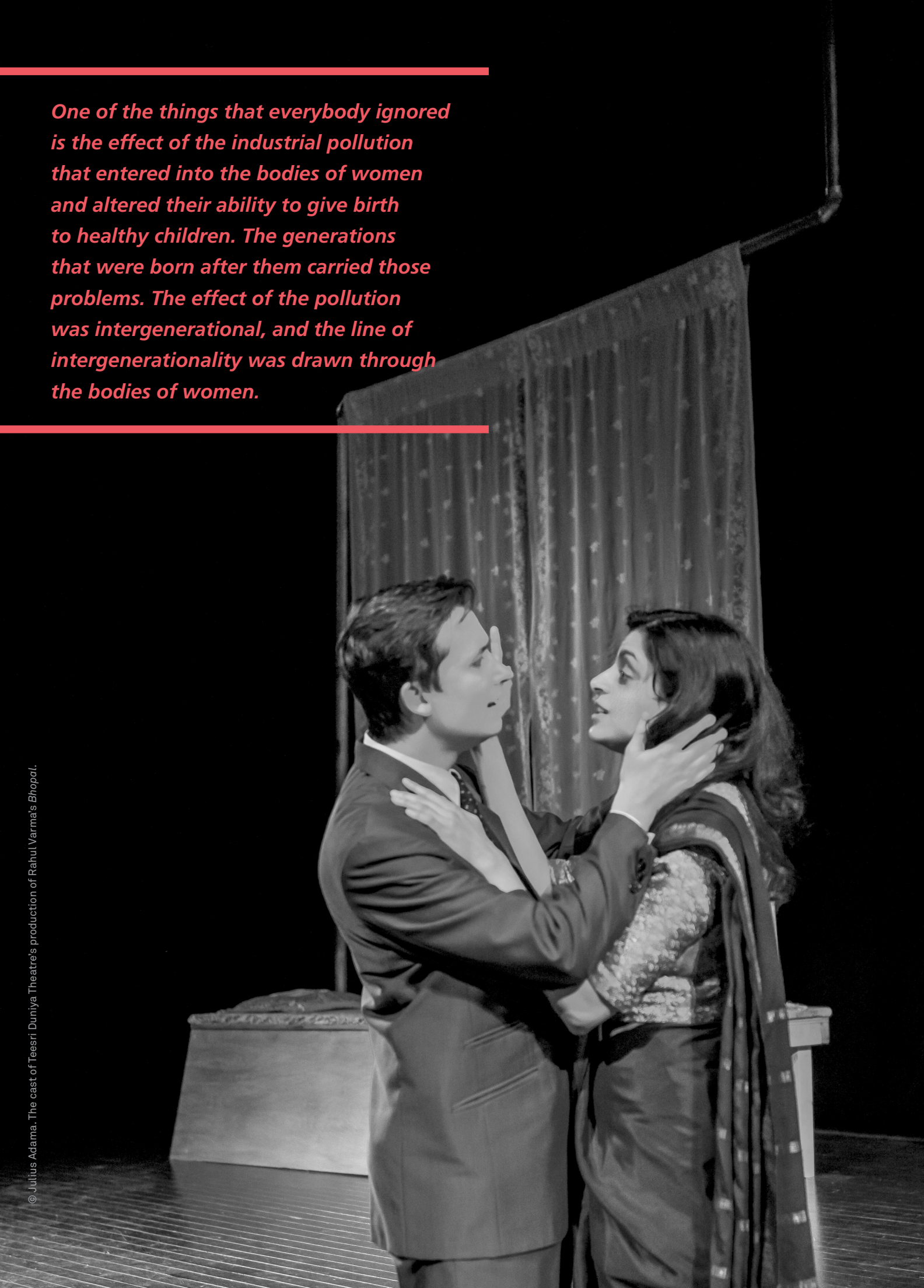
I first met Mr. Varma while taking a seminar course at McGill University, prior to the remounting of *Bhopal* for the thirtieth anniversary of the industrial disaster. Varma shared with the class his theoretical approach to politically engaged playwriting rooted in fiction. We met again at Teesri Duniya's office after *Bhopal* finished its run at the Segal Centre to revisit the subject. The playwright was kind enough to answer my questions on the creative process behind his play and on theatre's ability to showcase complex narratives where multiple truths can coexist.

* * *

Despina Artenie: You have dedicated your career as a playwright to bringing issues of social justice onto the stage. What makes fiction, and more specifically theatre, an efficient medium for this task?

Rahul Varma: The thing about theatre is that it's the most political of the art forms. The audience is sitting in the proximity of the performance. I think it's an exploration; it evolves on a daily basis. With fiction, the range of exploration is greater than it is with testimonial—or documentary-based theatre. I don't wish to undermine the documentary or the testimonial, but the question is: How could I go beyond? I think that what continues to be a concern for me with testimonial and documentary theatre are personal stories. When we tell our personal stories we are not critical of ourselves,

One of the things that everybody ignored is the effect of the industrial pollution that entered into the bodies of women and altered their ability to give birth to healthy children. The generations that were born after them carried those problems. The effect of the pollution was intergenerational, and the line of intergenerationality was drawn through the bodies of women.



© Julius Adama. The cast of Teesri Duniya Theatre's production of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*.

we only tell from our perspective. The idea of the interactivity with the opposite force is either spoken by the subject or perceived as she wishes. In some way, the opposition's position is always underrepresented or represented from the perspective of the one telling the story. In fiction, I have to be honest to all characters. If I must not have any bias against them, then I must like them. Only then can I criticize or explore them. Because of that approach, fiction gives me a larger range. If I begin to dislike a character, then my prejudice will set in and I will be telling the playwright's perception as opposed to the character's reality. I can achieve a certain truthfulness with my imagination, which I will not be able to achieve in something that is very documentary, very testimonial.

D.A. **Do you think it's easier for the audience to critically engage with the play if they don't feel like they are questioning somebody's personal story?**

R.V. Yes. The element of surprise, the element of drama, moments of ups and downs—these are more present in fictional theatre. When you are writing using some of the craft—you know when the story is slow, when the story is heightened, where there is a surprise element and where there is subversion—all those factors keep the audience more closely interested in the play than if it is a matter of fact. The reality is not to write about facts, but to discover the truth. Truth can be discovered when it is dialogical, when it is interactive: when both sides of the coin are well represented.

D.A. **What made you want to write a play about the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster?**

R.V. The implication of Bhopal on the world scene was pretty massive because it kept unfolding. By six days after the incident happened, you could see that the disaster had multiplied manifold. I could see that a lot more was to come. It left a very big question that was still unexplored: the value of life. The media, the industry and the political leaders began to play a blame game: Was the design at fault, was there a mechanical failure, why was this product being produced? What we weren't seeing in this conversation was what the disaster had done to people, and what it continues to do. There was a possibility for us to look at the issue from the point of view of the dignity of life. Instead, we were looking at it from the point of view of chemistry gone wrong. The human element was completely missing. It's a conventional practice in our world of theatre to use the phrase "human cost" at the drop of a hat, but we need to define what "human cost" means. Here it was manifested in the form of the loss of the lives of people who never enjoyed the benefits of the work of that factory, and that was the poor class. But they were the ones who were paying with their lives. For me theatre is always about those who are marginalized. It's about people who we do not care about. My responsibility as a writer is to care for those who have been ignored. There were thousands and thousands of people who were dying before, during, and after the disaster. I had an actual encounter with this child, Zarina, whom I mention in the play and whom I saw in a cinema. I met her family. It was inspiration from one artistic discipline to another. Watching cinema, a documentary film, triggered me to write a play.

D.A. **How did you balance your focus on dramatizing the human cost of the industrial disaster with the use of characters as symbols for different ideologies and socioeconomic structures?**

R.V. In some ways theatre is very subversive as an art form. Playwrights need to be critical and analytical. What I have found very disturbing in the theatre in general is that it is always about well-to-do people, sexy people, people who have immense amounts of wealth but who suffer depression. How about ninety percent of humanity that we forget about: the underclasses? We don't write about them. The selection of the characters that I made here took into account the cultural variations, gender realities, and class realities. These are represented through the various characters that were conceived in the play.

The characters interact with each other face to face, letting the audience understand the complexities of their lives from their points of view in dialogical form. The audience benefits from understanding their realities. I am not saying that they will agree with my point of view, but they do have the opportunity to decide where their loyalties will go. When you write about the characters, you cannot sideline the underclass. The representation of women must be real. Theatre is so full of men and writing about men. We need to change that. It is important to write about strong women who can tell compelling stories, who can present society in the way it is, incorporating their personal experience and their political experience. The characters come from three different continents in the play. We come to understand the geographical complexity of what the thought processes are when one is rich, one is poor, and one is trying to be rich.

D.A. **In the play, the characters who suffer the most are the two women, Izaat and Madiha. Do you think the gendered nature of the violence inflicted by the chemical disaster was underrepresented in previous conversations about the impact of the disaster?**

R.V. In theatre in general, in a social catastrophe, and in war, women

© Julius Adama. The cast of Teesri Duniya Theatre's production of Rahul Varma's *Bhopal*.

are not underrepresented; they are subjugated. For example, war: War is always reported in the form of men fighting with each other. We have not paid attention to the fact that cases of abduction, sexual enslavement, rape, and women being snatched away take place in countries where war happens. They are always sidelined in comparison to who is the victor and the political dynamics. We have the experience of two world wars and several genocides. We have not taken into account how much damage war has done socially, psychologically, and physically to women who continue to suffer from it.

The same was true in Bhopal. One of the things that everybody ignored is the effect of the industrial pollution that entered into the bodies of women and altered their ability to give birth to healthy children. The generations that were born after them carried those problems. The effect of the pollution was intergenerational, and the line of intergenerationality was drawn through the bodies of women. The serious damage was done to a particular gender—not only in the form of what is happening to their organs, but also in their ability to procreate. This is quite, quite big. This aspect had to be understood.

D.A. **In the introduction to *Bhopal*, you note that your father, Dr. Daya Varma, conducted research in Bhopal and served as the motivation behind the character or Dr. Labonté. Why is the character Canadian in the play?**

R.V. We need to bring more woman characters on the stage. Why as a Canadian woman? Because anything that is written in Canada, even if it is global, has to ground Canada into the plot, into the story through the characters. It is not enough to say that a new Canadian is trying to write about his ex-country. It is much more powerful if Canada gets a spot in the plot. The best way to introduce Canada into the plot is by inserting characters. My approach here is that it's not enough to speak about those people: you have bring them into the stories so they can tell you their complexities from their own point of view, through their own dialogues, actions and behaviours. Then it becomes a lot more acceptable.

The reality of the twenty-first century is that there is more intermixing of people, more people across cultures who know each other. There is no reason for us to tell a story in a one-sided way. We need to be able to have the cultural interactions and the power relations of people of different persuasions into the same story.

D.A. **Finally, what sort of engagement do you wish audiences to have with the play? Did you aim towards a relationship of understanding and empathy towards the characters, or a critical engagement with the politics of the play?**

R.V. Understanding is a relative word because there is no single kind of understanding. Yes, you want to empathize with the characters, but more than empathizing with the characters, the play also permits us to ask if what we are doing is ethically correct. There is a lack of ethics in the relationships among people depending on how much wealth one has. The play allows us to question some of the ethics of survival. Our audience can begin to explore the idea that a person doesn't have to die because of an incident like this, and that that person died because of unethical practices that we have permitted. These are questions I would like the audience to take away. We have to always think of the future, think of our children, of what kind of world we are leaving after us. If the play can sensitize the community, if it can make them question the mindset of the people in power, to understand that such things must not happen to begin with, then I'm happy.

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THEATRICAL INTERVENTIONS

MIEKO OUCHI

After twenty-five years of working in theatre for young people, I always cringe a little when I hear theatre companies or artists talk about their school- or family-targeted productions as a way to build adult audiences. Yes, it's true, if kids like the theatre you make for them as young audiences, there is a better chance they'll come back as adults to try out your more mature fare. But young people are so much more than potential audience members. Or adult subscribers in training. They are highly discerning audience members right now, with their own ideas, thoughts, and needs. And they can smell a rat. A student at a performance of one of our elementary shows once stopped me in the aisle before the performance and asked if I worked at the theatre. When I said I did, she asked: "I have a question. Is this a real play? Or just a fake play for kids?" After I explained to her that what she was going to see was in fact a real play for kids, I had to stop and think: What had she seen before that brought her to that question?

More than being fed throw-away fluff, or preachy diatribes, or "fake plays for kids," young people deserve the best we can give them. For that to happen, we, as theatres and artists, need to challenge ourselves to meet them head-on with work that is interesting and relevant and that pushes them to consider the world they live in and their part in it. It also means we need to challenge our thinking around the position we take in our theatrical relationship with youth. It might mean letting go of titles we might be very attached to, like "expert," "teacher," or "professional." Can we make a sea change and begin to see ourselves as co-investigators of ideas?

This concept of "co-investigating" is the jumping off point at Concrete Theatre. It has been our framework for developing participatory plays with young people: my play *The Bully Project* over the last two years; a fifteen-year run of Jane Heather's *Are We There Yet*, a ground-breaking participatory play about sexual health; and a four-year run of my participatory play, *Decisions, Decisions*, about self-esteem and decision-making

As we have learned from these shows and other participatory workshops, when the toolbox of theatre is used to open up discussion with young audiences about issues that defy easy answers, things get interesting. Especially when young people sense—rightly—that the play they are watching neither gives them magic solutions to challenging questions nor fishes for the "right" answers. This approach is strengthened when the artists engaging them position themselves not as the experts in the room, but as fellow humans exploring the issue with them. By "co-investigating," you begin to move past a simplistic one-sided lecture against—for example, bullying and name-calling—into a more sophisticated two-sided discussion.

Using co-investigation in participatory theatre, such as *The Bully Project*, takes this even further than a more traditional, text-based play. Interaction with the audience makes space for collaborative exploration: the artists facilitate the young people in building observations about what they've just seen, push them to examine why the characters took certain actions, and help them speculate about how things could have gone differently. The improvisational space within the script allows us to try out some of those ideas on stage: What might happen if the character makes a different choice? This model of structured improvisational exploration supports the notions that everything is truly up for consideration and that no ideas have been predetermined to be wrong or bad.

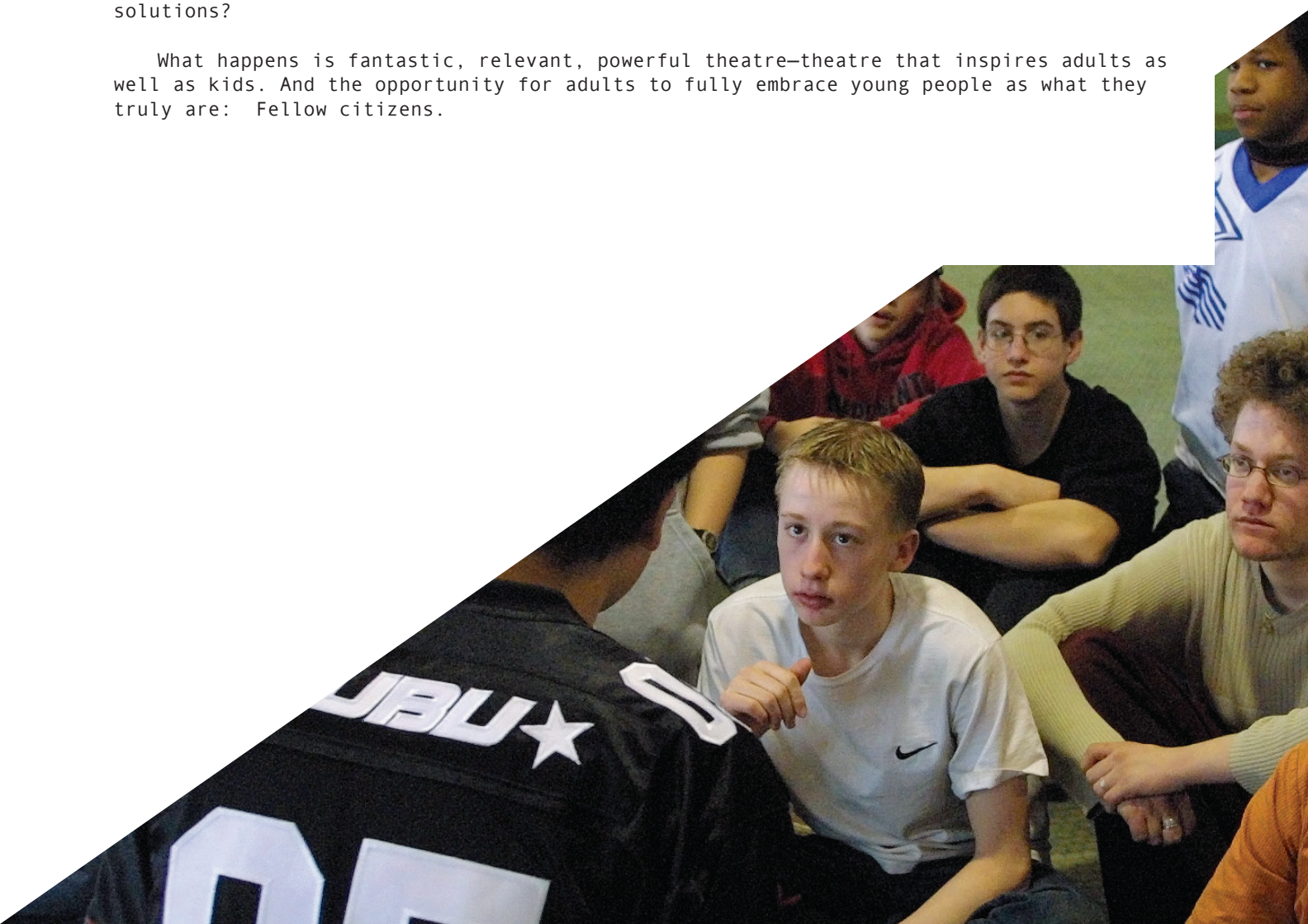
In participatory theatre, the proxy of character allows students to stand back and look at at issues with objectivity: they become able to speak more frankly about things that happen to them and at their school because the issues are couched within the safety net of a scene. That's not to say they don't have a lot of "bad," or less effective, ideas, too! The model of participatory theatre, however, allows both artist and audience the opportunity to try ideas out in a safe space, where young people can see how they might play out and then find more effective or safe alternatives.

This idea of co-investigation doesn't just work with participatory theatre. At their best, text-based plays for young audiences can bring multiple perspectives to a story, ask difficult and complex questions, and hopefully open up young people to new ideas or concepts they might not have fully considered before. It also engages them on an emotional level.

That being said, not every issue is ripe for theatrical intervention. Once, when asked about the topics their students struggle with most, a social studies teacher offered, "Levels of government." Hmm. Okay. Sometimes, even theatre can't help. But any time an idea defies easy definition or calls for ideas and answers that move past jingoistic responses that adults have constructed—like the infamous "just say no to drugs" or the current mantra of "just stand up to bullies"— things get much more interesting for us as theatre artists and practitioners. Sex. Identity. Bullying. Discrimination. Gender. Addiction. Mental health. These are issues that adults struggle with. Pretending we have all the answers is inauthentic and patently untrue. Openly working through these issues with young people, however, can help them make more informed and critical choices.

So what happens if we position ourselves as co-investigators rather than experts? What if we create theatrical space for artists and audiences to collaboratively build an understanding of an issue from the inside out? What happens when we admit to kids that we don't have all the answers? That sometimes even adults don't know what to do or struggle with these issues ourselves? What happens when we value the immense expertise that children and youth already have about the issues they live with every day, and use our own prism of experience and age to help illuminate new ideas and lead them through exploring potential solutions?

What happens is fantastic, relevant, powerful theatre—theatre that inspires adults as well as kids. And the opportunity for adults to fully embrace young people as what they truly are: Fellow citizens.



PRISMATIC ARTS 2014:
GROWING A CULTURALLY DIVERSE FESTIVAL

MAGGIE STEWART

Greetings from myself, Shahin, and the Prismatic Arts Festival team in Halifax! For five days last August, we revelled in the chaotic, sleep-deprived, caffeine-fueled, art-packed, dream world that is festival hosting. Prismatic 2014, the fourth incarnation of the festival since its inception in 2008, brought with it the highest of highs and the lowest of lows—all of which have inspired us to continue to nurture the strengths and successes of the festival as it emerges as one of Canada's leading arts events.

Prismatic 2014 marked significant change for the festival, in several ways. First, Prismatic and its sister company Onelight Theatre became the resident companies at Alderney Landing in Dartmouth, NS. By our estimate, we are the first culturally diverse theatre company to take up residence in a purpose-built theatre space. We are honoured (and saddened) that this happened in 2013. And, second, with our move to Alderney Landing, Prismatic will grow from a biennial event to an annual festival held in the end of August!

So, why move to Alderney? Alderney, the large community cultural centre located on the Halifax-harbour, offers an art gallery, a 300-seat sprung-floor theatre space, an outdoor stage with capacity for over 5,000 people, and is connected to a branch of the Halifax Public Library. In the past, Onelight rented space for rehearsals and productions (most recently, the Neptune Studio). Prismatic was held at multiple venues in the city, and thus, without a clear home, it was challenging to establish a connection with our audience. Alderney provides us with the facilities and community exposure that will allow us to advance our programming and reach a wider audience .

While the move was a great opportunity for Onelight and Prismatic, it was also a leap of faith for our organizations. It brought significant challenges, such as increasing our programming in order to meet the expectations of a resident company (for example, moving from one theatre production per year to three and adding a theatre school) and attracting audiences to a venue that had not presented much professional work in recent years.

Having a single, multipurpose venue to house our festival and conference allowed Prismatic 2014 to welcome over 10,000 audience members to 81 presentations and workshops featuring the talents of 163 artists and arts professionals. We were thrilled to present long-time Prismatic friends Zaccheus Jackson, Reeny Smith, the Sanctified Brothers, and Paul Wong at Prismatic's new home. We brought emerging artists into the light, including spoken word phenom Allysa Flint; Mi'kmaq photographer Jayme-Lynn Gloade; and performance / visual artist Stephanie Yee with her interactive installation, *Broken English Karaoke*. Finally, Prismatic 2014 saw inspiring performances by some of Canada's leading Aboriginal and culturally diverse artists: Santee Smith / Kahawi Dance Theatre's NeoIndigenA; and MT Space Theatre's *Body 13*, directed by Majdi Bou Mater. The festival culminated with a spectacular, free, all-ages performance by A Tribe Called Red, which brought 3000 people to the Dartmouth waterfront. It was beautiful to see people of all ages, from all backgrounds, coming together to celebrate culture, to dance and cheer together. Prismatic 2014 was pure magic.

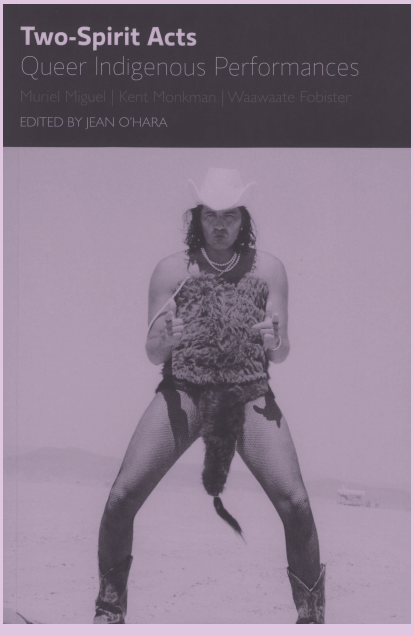
Then we learned that our dear friend and a great talent Zaccheus Jackson died in a tragic accident in Toronto. He closed out Prismatic on Sunday night. We hugged him and made plans on Monday. He left for Toronto on Tuesday and died on Wednesday. The highest of highs was followed so quickly by the lowest of lows.

The light in the immense darkness of Zaccheus' death was seeing how his work touched so many people so deeply. The tributes that rolled in from all corners of the country were a palpable demonstration that the arts matter: that being able to bring new voices, perspectives, and art forms to people through performances and workshops matters; and that Prismatic, as a valuable part of national community-building, matters. We are inspired by Zaccheus and all of our artists to continue to grow Prismatic into a truly spectacular national festival.

See you at Prismatic—August 20-23, 2015.

BOOK REVIEW

BY
ANNE NOTHOF



TWO-SPIRITED ACTS: QUEER INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCES. EDITED BY JEAN O'HARA. TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2013. PP. 138.

Two-Spirited Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances continues the important social and cultural work of *Staging Coyote's Dream: An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English*, volumes one (2003) and two (2008), edited by Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles. The focus of the collection is on the Native playwright as trickster—a shape-shifter, shaman, and seer. Three playwrights, Muriel Miguel, Kent Monkman, and Waawaate Fobister, perform their own stories as central characters in personal and political decolonization. In exercising sexual freedom, they challenge inhibitory assumptions about gendered roles of First Nations in the past and present.

The collection, edited by Jean O'Hara, has an evident educational agenda—to enlighten readers about the spiritual and cultural significance of bi-sexuality for First Nations and to challenge prejudice and ignorance. The foreword by Tomson Highway, with a typically subversive title, "Where Is God's Wife Or Is He Gay?" sets the stage for the satire and humour that colour the works to follow and provides entertaining definitions for key terms. Through a comparison of Native spiritualism with the polytheism of Greek and Roman religions and their uninhibited gods and goddesses, Highway investigates the imprint of Christian monotheism on Native culture in North America since 1492. He provides an intriguing etymology of "hermaphrodite" in the cross-gendered god Hermaphroditus, the offspring of the messenger god, Hermes, and his sister, the goddess of love, Aphrodite. He argues that with Christianity, the idea of the divinity in female form was repressed (conveniently neglecting the seminal role of the Virgin Mary in Catholicism). Before contact, First Nations spiritualism was pantheistic: the "great spirit" was not manifested in human form, but present in all life. Whereas monotheism is obsessed with gender, dividing the world into male, female, and neuter, Aboriginal languages divide the world into animate and inanimate within the superstructure of a circle. In Native cultures, hermaphrodites were privileged members—caregivers, artists, and visionaries. Highway's aggrandizement of the role recalls the European nineteenth-century romantic view of the poet as prophet and seer; as a gay writer, he is in good company. Given his own history as an acclaimed

First Nations playwright, whose works *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989) have been performed across Canada and internationally, his foreword provides critical credibility for the plays to follow.

It is also a tough act to follow. In her introduction, Jean O'Hara provides a short history of her discovery of First Nations stories while living in California, and her realization of their importance for cultural healing and decolonization. She believes that the plays in *Two-Spirited Acts* are "expression[s] of renewal and survival" (xx). Defining "two-spirited" as wholly inclusive, moving beyond colonial binaries, she asserts the importance of including these voices in conversations with other disciplines: theatre studies, Indigenous studies, queer studies, feminist studies. This is a collaborative anthology, with introductions for each work by different authors, each with a different approach and style.

The works themselves are also stylistically diverse, although all are solo performances and all are expressions of the essential creative role of the two-spirited individual. *Hot 'n' Soft*, which premiered at Buddies in Bad Times as part of the Queer Culture Festival in 1991, "was the first lesbian theatre that depicted the rawness of desire between two women" (6), according to the introduction by Sharon M. Day. Written, directed, and performed by Muriel Miguel, a founding member of Spiderwoman Theater, it graphically enacts a personal account of Miguel's first and subsequent lesbian experiences. With a multicoloured and patterned quilt as a backdrop to suggest a diversity of encounters, the performance begins with the sounds of an orgasm (much like *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* [1987] by Terrence McNally). Miguel introduces herself as the storyteller and explains her fascination for women with body hair. Hairiness then segues into a Coyote story, in which Coyote disguises herself as a well-equipped male in order to seduce Fox and discovers that a penis is unnecessary. Miguel provides an explanation of tricksters in the Native tradition, signaling the educational function of her work—a didactic element that threatens to subvert the shock value. She has discovered that there is little lesbian erotica, and *Hot 'n' Soft* is her response, describing (and illustrating) sex with food and chairs. She concludes her performance with another story about Coyote's devious relationship with two women in different cities, and an account of her own more successful relationship with one. Given Miguel's many contributions to First Nations theatre in Canada and the United States—as an actor in *The Rez Sisters*, *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, and *Buz' Gem Blues*, for example, and her work at the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, the Banff Centre, and abroad—she is an important two-spirited theatre artist, but *Hot 'n' Soft* is limited by its confrontational literalness. Like many solo performance pieces, it is integrally circumscribed by its creator.

As this collection also demonstrates, many First Nations works are typically autobiographical. To achieve a satiric distance in his performances, Kent Monkman assumes the persona of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, a drag queen with an extravagant war bonnet, to provoke destabilizing reflections on European responses to First Nations. Monkman is a multi-disciplinary artist, a trickster who crosses several genres. He is an acclaimed painter and filmmaker, and his works have been featured in international exhibits in England, the Netherlands, Australia, and France, as well as the National Art Gallery in Ottawa. For his epic, dramatic paintings, such as *Miss America* (2012), he pillages the history of painting, from the Baroque era to Romanticism, to investigate and challenge the subjectivity of the European eye on Aboriginal peoples and the "New World." His subversive works tell a multitude of stories about the history of "contact" and provide a critical perspective on the trajectory of empires. Entitled "Spirits of Mischief and Self-Invention," Richard William Hill's informative and insightful introduction to three of Monkman's performances provides a strong aesthetic and theoretical basis for an appreciation of Monkman's diverse works and his international successes. Hill sees Monkman's retrospective interrogation as "not simply a rewriting of history or a contemporary view of the past, but a recognition of the extent to which we remain interpellated by the ideas, objects, and images of other times" (41).

Monkman's *Taxonomy of the European Male* (2005) was first performed in Warwickshire, UK, as part of an exhibition entitled *The American West*. In a lecture couched in a learned formal style, Miss Chief Testickle appropriates the voice of nineteenth-century painter George Catlin to relate how she has devoted her talents to painting the European male in his native habitat. She describes the physical features of typical Englishmen, including a "bold and angular nose" (51), and their temperament as "noble, gentlemanly, high-minded, although they are often prone to snobbery" (51). Europeans become the objects of her reductive gaze, just as Indians were the "exotic" subjects of European painters.

In *Séance*, presented as a response to Monkman's exclusion from the First People's Gallery in the Royal Ontario Museum in 2007, Miss Chief summons the spirits of three dead painters in order to interrogate them on their aesthetics and their subjects. French artist, Eugene Delacroix, who painted monumental landscapes and historic panoramas such as *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), explains that he chooses his subjects from classical literature. He portrayed a young Native couple in a work called *The Natchez* (1835), characters in a novel by Chateaubriand entitled *Atala, ou les amours des deux sauvages dans le desert.* They were members of a tribe that was decimated by the French in the Mississippi region and romanticized as noble savages "in tune with nature as she really is" (60). Toronto artist Paul Kane travelled across Canada twice in 1845 and 1848 to record a history of the vanishing Indian. But Miss Chief considers him to be preoccupied with "authenticity" in his memorializing of a doomed ideal. Similarly, American artist Paul Catlin recorded images of American chiefs and warriors, and informs Miss Chief that he aspires to building a magnificent park where they might live with the buffalo on which their lifestyle depends. However, there is no place for two-spirited Natives in his park. Miss Chief rejects all three limited portraits of her people and ends her performance with a dance to celebrate her own reality.

In *Justice of the Piece*, ironically performed at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC, in 2012, Monkman in his alter-

ego of Miss Chief assumes the mantle of a judge, introducing herself to her audience as a famous performer who is determined to create a "Nation of Mischief." She interviews a series of candidates for admission, all of whom have failed to qualify as a status Indian with the attendant "privileges." Hans Neumann believes that in spirit he is Cheyenne warrior, one of over 40,000 "hobby Indians" in Germany who want to live in harmony with nature away from polluted cities and oppressive governments. Cut Out is an Indigenous man whose percentage of Native blood is too low to qualify for reserve living and casino earnings. A bead artist complains that she also lacks enough Indian blood for her work to be officially considered "authentic." A white hunter wants Native hunting rights so that he can feed his family. The grandchild of a white man and a Blackfoot woman fears that her own children will lose their status if they don't marry Natives. Blue Eyes has a Cherokee partner, and their marriage is not recognized by the Nation. The Dreamer is a Wannabee who believes she was Native in a past life. Because Miss Chief believes in "aggressive immigration" to strengthen her "Nation of Mischief," she welcomes everyone. Monkman's satiric portraits are inclusive; non-Natives and Natives are equal opportunity targets.

Agokwe by Waawaate Fobister has travelled across Canada to enthusiastic receptions in co-productions with regional theatres. Its premiere at Buddies in Bad Times in 2008 was critically acclaimed, and rewarded with six Dora Awards for outstanding new play, production, direction, performance, costume, and lighting. Fobister performs multiple roles, appearing first as the trickster Nanabush in half bird mask and wings; as a young powwow dancer named Jake; as the hockey hero Mike who is the object of Jake's adoration; as Mike's single mother, Betty Moses, a reformed alcoholic; as Goose, a party girl with sexual designs on Mike; and as Shyanne, who has designs on Jake. Nanabush, who assumes an audience unacquainted with the works of Tomson Highway and Thomas King, explains the role of the trickster, and exhorts the audience to spread the message of the play so they can "live in a nice happy family" (100). He also explains the meaning of "Agokwe," an Anishnaabe word for two-spirited who are shamans, mediators, and healers. In an attempt to broaden his message, he then counsels the audience on environmental responsibility, referencing Muppet Kermit the Frog's song in his acknowledgement that "its [*sic*] not easy being green" (100). The play then traces the gradual, painful enlightenment of two gay teenagers in the small northern Ontario town of Kenora: Jake becomes stronger as he learns to acknowledge his "two-spirited" nature; Mike, whose macho identity cannot admit to loving another man, self-destructs. In performance, Fobister effectively inhabits all of the roles, but the characters are limited by their confessional dialogue. Betty Moses' final realization that her son is "agokwe" reinforces the play's didactic agenda:

> two-spirited. It means you're special. Isn't that lovely? Isn't it? You know, sometimes we think we're so smart but we are stupid. We dirty everything, the land, the air, the water… and ourselves. We make those around us who are special feel dirty because we are stupid! In the old days we didn't waste people the way we do now… everybody was welcome, everybody had a place (132).

Nanabush, resuming his/her role as a Master of Ceremonies at the end of the play, advises the audience to "act on" what it has witnessed. Such overt advice is out of character for a trickster, who typically prompts learning through mistakes and disorder.

The publication of *Two-Spirited Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances* signals that First Nations performance art has become an integral part of the crazy quilt that is Canadian theatre. Indeed, Native works are well-travelled in Europe, the US, and Australia, representing the unique productions of a country that is interrogating its colonial history. De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island has taken its collective creations twice to theatre festivals in Scotland. In 2012, it performed *Global Savages*, a play about the 18,000-year history of Indigenous peoples in North America, at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, and returned in 2014 for a production at the On Common Ground festival with 150 community performers from Glasgow. In 2012, the company collaborated with an Indigenous theatre company in Villa El Salvador, Peru. Native playwrights, such as Daniel David Moses, Drew Hayden Taylor, and Kenneth T. Williams, involve the trickster in contemporary social scenarios. A wide range of First Nations' voices now speaks to a diversity of issues; the trickster still has many stories to tell.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