

I am your spy
Le monton et la baleine
The seventh asian youth project
Punkte
Marshyre People's Theatre



vol.2, no.1 June 2001

theatre

cultural
diversity and
the stage

...and is told that when
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penalty when they arrive
a man of Moroccan origin
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Le Monton et la Baleine
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Photo: Pascal Sanchez.



Editor: Tal Ashkenazi

Editorial Board: Paul Lefebvre, Edward Little, Rahul Varma

Contributors: David Fancy, Alexander Ferguson,

Lina de Guevara, Paul Lefebvre, Edward Little

Art Director: Tracy Martin

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Fax: (514) 848-0267. Email: tduniya@aei.ca.

Website: www.teesriduniyatheatre.com

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Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE

Address:

4324 St. Laurent Blvd.
Montreal, QC H2W 1Z3
Canada

Tel: (514) 848-0238

Fax: (514) 848-0267

Email: tduniya@aei.ca

Website:

www.teesriduniyatheatre.com

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From the editor

Welcome to a new issue of **alt.theatre**, my first, and the first of many, as editor. I feel a few words of introduction are in order, and my story ties into the theme uniting some of the articles in this issue.

My association with alt.theatre flows through Teesri Duniya Theatre. When the company presented Jason Sherman's play, *Reading Hebron*, last spring, I was called upon to be part of a steering committee. Our task was to set up and direct a series of activities which would allow the audience to express their opinions about the play and discuss the issues it raised. By the time the play opened, we had put together an exhibition about the events described in the play, arranged to sample and document the audience's reactions and set up a public debate between two academics.

The idea behind the exercise was in keeping with the philosophy of most alternative theatre companies in this country: to include the audience and the public in the company's activities, rather than set up the invisible barriers that so often exist where the stage ends and the seats begin.

This quest for audience participation is, essentially, what most distinguishes community-based theatre from its mainstream counterpart. Be it in the choice of plays, recruitment of actors or the attempts to facilitate discussion about the repertoire, community-based theatre truly belongs to us all. It tells our stories, listens to our voices and reflects our concerns.

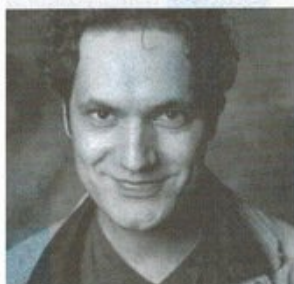
Three of the articles in this issue deal with projects that aimed to turn a theatre event into a community project. David Fancy of the MarshFire People's Theatre Company tells us about an original method his company found to raise money and include community members in *The Great Big Mosquito Show*; Lina de Guevara writes about *Worldplay*, a series of plays from the home countries of immigrants in Victoria, British Columbia; and Ted Little presents a collaborative theatre project based on the experiences of young South Asian Canadians.

I'm certain this issue will inspire your own creativity and help you find new ways of working with, and for, your audience. I thank you for holding on to a dream that allows "laymen" like me to become part of a great community. In the spirit of participation, I strongly urge you to make this magazine your own, and express your opinions on its content.

Tal Ashkenazi

GETTING OUT AND STAYING THERE

by Alexander Ferguson



Mordechai Vanunu can see the bars of his own cage. No surprise, he's been in solitary confinement in an Israeli prison for over 10 years now. His crime? Blowing the whistle on Israel's secret nuclear weapons program to a British newspaper, the Sunday Times, in 1986. After years as a nuclear installation technician, he could no longer stomach the potential slaughter of ten to twenty million of his Arab neighbours. Now he languishes in his cell, a declared enemy of the state, with years to go in his sentence. His tormentors have offered him a lighter sentence - if he signs a confession that paints him as the sinister foreign operative the State of Israel wishes he was. According to the state, Vanunu's betrayal was an act of hatred rather than an act of compassion. So far, Vanunu has chosen not to sign the confession. It's one of the few things in his stark life that he has any choice over.

Mordechai Vanunu's defiance is the subject of Camyar Chai's play, *I Am Your Spy: A Day in the Life of Mordechai Vanunu*. As we shall see, his sacrifice has important implications for those of us who believe in alternatives to mainstream theatre.

shit thousands of times, that's up to me and you can fucking stare at me all you want."

Unlike the hundreds of inconsequential choices we make every day, Vanunu's sanity and freedom are riding on the few limited choices he has. Mordechai Vanunu was a free man when he chose to expose Israel's nuclear weapons program. He was free in a way that most of us are not. There were a thousand reasons for keeping his mouth shut, but he chose to speak, because he believed in freedom, and to Vanunu's way of thinking, freedom means love:

"You know the little boy, Ari, who lives down the street...with those cute little red cheeks? You think I hate him, Baba? I think of that beautiful little child and then I see his skin melting, his flesh atom-izing, his little muscles trembling with pain. Baba, I don't hate, I love. Do you how small Israel is relative to the effects of the explosion? (He gently cups his hand, holds it out. Sotto voice.) That small. Think about that and then talk to me about hate."

Mordechai Vanunu's experience of imprisonment, as interpreted by Camyar Chai, is a test of these high

"I decide when and how I eat...
stare at me all you want."

In the opening scene, with Vanunu speaking to a surveillance camera that is always watching, Chai raises the issue of choice versus freedom: "Now is the precise moment the food needs to be entering my stomach but you've ruined this moment too because it wasn't delivered in the right now moment. Every moment is destroyed thanks to your incompetence, your unwillingness to co-operate, and whatever the fuck you call it, you degenerate. I decide when I eat not you not you not you...Never. Never, never, never. You decide when lights go out and they never go out you never go out you you're always fucking there so you can have that I give you that I deal with that I put up with it but not my food. You can't have that. I decide when and how I eat. If I want to swallow it whole, it's my choice. If I wasn't to chew every piece of the

ideals, ideals that are complicated by the banal implications of the words "choice" and "privilege". Even as a prisoner Vanunu has choice: sign the confession and receive privilege, or stay in his cell and remain free.

Both as writer and performer of the piece, Chai handles this struggle with mesmerizing subtlety. His Vanunu presents the challenge of a true outsider: he's a Moroccan Jew in a country where European Jews consider themselves the elite of society; he's half Arab in a Jewish state; he's a Jewish convert to Christianity; he's a bomb builder who refuses to build bombs. In short, he's a dissident. As the engine of this play, he provides creators of alternative theatre with a provocative model: the outsider fighting for the outside - which is different from the outsider fighting to get inside.

Fighting for the margins

While dissidence marginalises, the margins it inhabits may offer a greater degree of self-expression. To defy the status quo is to find creativity in spite of the limits imposed by the status quo. Marginalised and "ethnic" artists in Canada find their inspiration from being on the outside, and sometimes by drawing on a culture that is the status quo elsewhere. However, in fighting for opportunity for the culturally marginalised, many theatre artists hope to penetrate the bastions of the "dominant culture". In theory, this will lead to fair and equal representation on the mainstream stages for marginalized theatre artists, ethnic and otherwise. The reality is much different.

What these artists are proposing is what philosopher Ken Wilbur calls a "translative" shift. A translative shift is a horizontal move. One mythology is replaced by another mythology. The details of the story and the names of the heroes may be different, but the goal is the same - to affirm and reassure the status quo. Before the shift, the old status quo; after the shift, the new status quo. This is different from a "transformative" shift. A transformative shift blows the whole thing apart. In this case it would re-create the way we

which fits tightly in the glove of our daily modern timetable, relaxes its push. The weight of time is briefly lifted from my shoulders.

In "I Am Your Spy", Vanunu says he is fighting for his rhythm. I find this statement absolutely essential. Increasingly, our world is dancing, metronomically, to one dominant rhythm - the rhythm of agenda. So it's rhythm that's at stake. And rhythm is time.

There is probably no other society on Earth that promotes as relentless a sense of time as ours does. I can think of no more radical and revolutionary an act than one that defies this crushing perception of time. For centuries we've sent our anthropologists to study cultures we are rapidly destroying. The best of these field scientists realize the big difference between "them" and us is how we live in time, how differently we inhabit our skins, how opposite our rhythms are. As a result of these differing rhythms, "they" tend to be content and happy, while we are alienated and depressed.

Let me make another generalisation: both mainstream society and mainstream theatre strive for the security of the formula. Both believe the predictability of the formula will

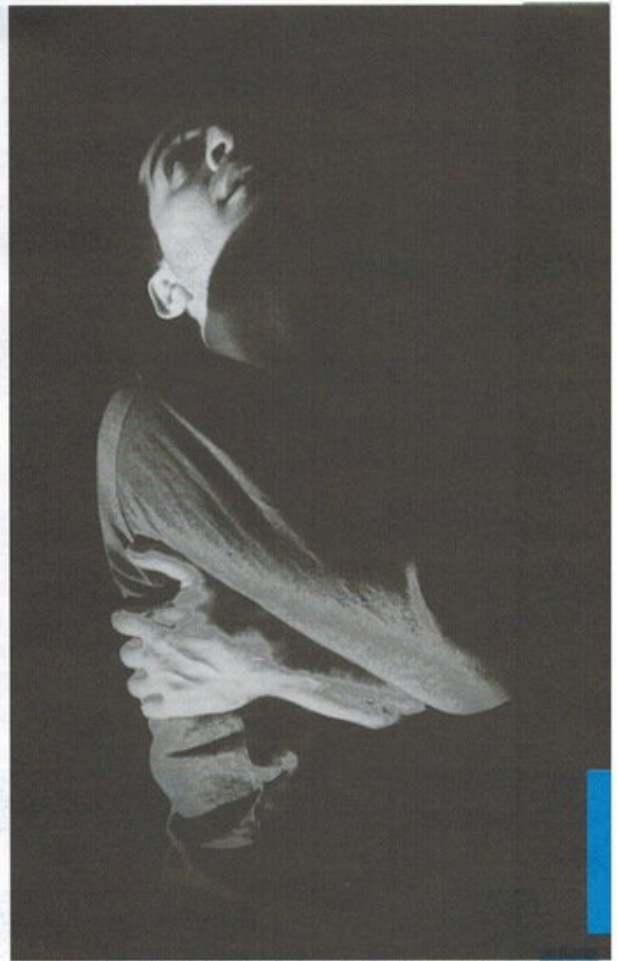
Why get caught in a reflex imitation of the dominant society's forms and appetites, appetites that reduce art and culture to "entertainment"?

do theatre, what we expect from the ritual and who we want to be before, during and after the exercise.

Theatre has often been defined as a dissection of time. While I don't completely disagree with this, I feel the most significant theatre experiences I have are when linear time gets stretched sideways, when it goes from measuring stick to a coiled snake - when time seems suspended. In such a moment I feel a sense of release. The "invisible hand" of the marketplace,

protect them from the uncertainties of life, that the structure of the formula will limit distortions to their sense of measured and forward-moving time. To be privileged in this society is to enter into guardianship of progressive time. To be privileged in the mainstream of theatre is to preserve the great formula, and offer consolation for its abysmal side effects.

I question the goal of achieving greater presence in the mainstream. The culturally marginalised pay taxes, so



A scene from *I Am Your Spy*, Playwright Caimar Chai.

they have as much right to funding as anyone else. But let them be the ones who define their field of play. Why get caught in a reflex imitation of the dominant society's forms and appetites, appetites that reduce art and culture to "entertainment"?

In his extreme isolation, Mordechai Vanunu is not fighting for more privilege or more access. He's fighting for the freedom of all people to inhabit their own rhythms. He doesn't want in. He wants out. I admit it's hard to get out when the dominant global economy is swallowing up "out", making everything "in". But if Vanunu can fight for his rhythm in a prison cell, then we should be able to dance in our margins. Out here time still offers a few surprises. ■



Alex Lazaridis Ferguson is an actor and playwright of Hellenic origin. He lives in Vancouver.

Un bateau de cargaison incertain

Paul Lefebvre



Le Mouton et la Baleine.
Texte : **Ahmed Ghazali**.
Mise en scène : **Wajdi Mouawad**.
Assistance à la mise en scène et régie : **Isabelle Brodeur**.
Décor, costumes et accessoires : **Jean Bard**.

Éclairages : **Éric Champoux**.
Composition musicale : **Michel F. Côté**.

Avec **Paul Ahmarani** (le Survivant),
Peter Bataklijev (le Second),
Saïd Benyoucef (le Gouverneur de Tanger),
Nazih Bouchareb (un Noyé),
Pascal Contamine (Premier Marin),
Pierre Curzi (le Capitaine Rogatchev),
Gérald Gagnon (Deuxième Marin),
Jean-Denis Levasseur (Quatrième Marin),
Serge Marius Takri (le Clandestin),
Dany Michaud (Hassan),
Igor Ovadis (le Docteur Baleineau),
Danièle Panneton (Hélène)
et **Robert Vézina** (Troisième marin et le Manager d'Océan International).
Une production du Théâtre de Quat'Sous (Montréal), présentée du 15 janvier au 17 février 2001.

Le Mouton et la Baleine n'est pas une pièce parfaite. Et c'est ce qui en fait la force. Le sentiment de complétion que procure au spectateur une pièce bien ficelée est, à la limite, néfaste: il laisse le spectateur dans un état de satisfaction qui nuit à un retour réflexif sur ce qu'il vient de voir. Le Mouton et la Baleine est la première pièce d'Ahmed Ghazali, qui est d'origine marocaine. Il est intéressant que l'auteur ait travaillé la dramaturgie de son texte avec Wajdi Mouawad, car Mouawad refuse toujours - c'est d'ailleurs un des traits de son écriture - les solutions évidentes et efficaces. Le Mouton et la Baleine est ainsi demeuré un texte dont la puissance d'évocation n'est jamais sacrifiée à des critères esthétiques étrangers à son projet. Le texte, en fait, doit sa force à deux éléments: d'une part, la précision de la pensée de l'auteur, la connaissance intime de ce dont il parle et, d'autre part, son sens inné du conflit dramatique. Chaque scène est, en effet, centrée sur un enjeu fort, bien défini.

Le Mouton et la Baleine se passe au cours d'une nuit, sur un cargo russe qui traverse le détroit de Gibraltar entre le Maroc et l'Espagne en route pour Marseille. Or, en pleine tempête, le cargo heurte une barque remplie d'une dizaine de Marocains qui tentaient de passer illégalement en Europe. Sur le pont, on empile les noyés. Un seul survivant demeure, muet, terrorisé au milieu des cadavres. Le capitaine du cargo rejoint d'abord les Britanniques qui occupent Gibraltar: ils répondent que ce n'est pas de leur ressort. Les Espagnols tiennent un discours similaire. Il arrive alors à rejoindre Tanger, au Maroc, où on lui dit que personne ne peut s'occuper des corps parce que c'est la Fête du Mouton, cette célébration

religieuse musulmane ou chaque famille tue un mouton, le fait rôtir et le mange. Or, le capitaine doit poursuivre son voyage vers Marseille et n'a pas le temps d'attendre toute une journée que la fête se termine.

La puissance d'évocation n'est jamais sacrifiée.

Plusieurs intrigues parallèles viennent traverser la trame principale. Il y a d'abord les marins qui, sachant qu'il y a dans les containers un clandestin embarqué en Afrique, le pourchassent sans relâche puis, l'ayant capturé, le jettent à la mer (Pratique très courante car les bateaux transportant des passagers clandestins doivent payer une amende lorsqu'ils arrivent au port). Il y a aussi un couple qui vit une crise : elle, Héléne, est Parisienne et son compagnon, Hassan, est d'origine marocaine quoiqu'il vive depuis longtemps à Paris ; c'est Héléne qui voulait revenir en France en cargo, pour ce soit plus « authentique ». Elle découvre avec un choc la réalité des migrants clandestins alors qu'Hassan revit ce qu'il avait toujours caché à Héléne : lui aussi est passé illégalement en Europe, sur une embarcation précaire qui, une nuit, a traversé ce même détroit de Gibraltar. Le tout se passe sur un fond de mondialisation : un flash-back nous montre un manager américain débarquer sur le bateau en hélicoptère pour annoncer au capitaine et à l'équipage que leur bateau et leurs contrats sont désormais la propriété d'Ocean International.

Le Mouton et la Baleine est d'abord et avant tout un texte, une parole. La langue est précise, directe, sans concession aux effets de réalisme. L'auteur connaît à fond toutes les implications de l'immigration clandestines, et ce à quoi il nous convie, c'est à une exploration de ce que ce phénomène détruit dans l'esprit humain. Il y a des scènes insoutenables, comme celle où les marins se racontent en rigolant des anecdotes sur comment ils ont passé par dessus bord des clandestins Noirs. Mais il y a aussi l'effrayante explosion d'Hassan dont toute la respectable vie européenne est fondée sur le mensonge de son immigration clandestine ; lorsqu'il entreprend d'énumérer à Héléne toutes leurs connaissances communes qui sont arrivées illégalement en Europe, la pièce prend une sorte d'effrayante grandeur. On réalise à quel point l'Occident, en apparence ouvert, est un lieu où l'on doit entrer de force.

Le Mouton et la Baleine ne cesse de développer la métaphore de son titre. Comme l'écrit l'auteur : « Le mouton, c'est le Sud. Les gens du Sud, et j'en suis un, ont tout du mouton : la mentalité de troupeau, l'air de victime et pour finir, le sort tragique de l'abattoir : les massacres, le génocide. Quant aux gens du Nord, les Occidentaux, j'ai appris avec le temps à les voir comme des baleines. Une baleine donne l'impression de puissance et de sérénité mais ce n'est qu'une illusion. Il n'y a rien de plus fragile qu'une baleine. Elle est l'animal qui sait le moins se défendre. Et le pire est qu'un beau matin, la baleine échoue sur la plage et se donne la mort. [...] Le Nord et le Sud, c'est l'histoire de

deux misères parallèles. Au Sud, on s'entre-tue et au Nord, on se suicide. D'un côté, on brûle dans le feu de la sécheresse et de l'autre, on gèle dans le froid de la solitude et de l'indifférence. Là-bas, on crève de faim, ici on n'a plus d'appétit. » Entre le Sud et le Nord, il y a ce bateau à l'identité incertaine, lieu suspendu hors du monde, mais qui concentre en lui les tensions et les contradictions du monde.

Je ne m'étendrai pas sur la mise en scène de Wajdi Mouawad, sinon pour dire que, comme toujours, elle fait confiance à la puissance d'évocation du théâtre. Un homme fait tourner un tuyau de plastique au dessus de sa tête et voilà un hélicoptère. La scène où l'on raconte comment on sacrifie un mouton devient la mise à mort du clandestin. Quelques tambours et quelques flûtes et c'est Tanger qui se met à exister devant nos yeux. Comme toujours, chez Mouawad, le théâtre est le lieu des conventions évocatrices, jamais de l'illusion. Et on retrouve de nouveau ici l'exceptionnelle organicité qu'il donne à ses distributions :

L'auteur connaît à fond les implications de l'immigration clandestine.

rarement voit-on des spectacles qui appartiennent autant aux comédiens qui les jouent. On sent qu'ils ont tous intégré en profondeur les paramètres du spectacle et qu'ils y sont étonnamment libres : en fait, on sent sur scène une complicité, une implication, que l'on ne trouve habituellement que dans les collectifs.

Mouawad est fasciné par ce qu'il y a d'inépuisable dans l'humain mais, pour lui, cela inclut le politique qui, généralement en Amérique du Nord, est exclu de la dramaturgie, ou est traité comme une donnée facilement explicable. Pour lui, le politique est déterminant, mais il se méfie des grilles d'analyse de la gauche traditionnelle. Il préfère les questions aux réponses. Un des points à noter chez lui, c'est qu'il emploie dans les spectacles du Quat'Sous des artistes issus de diverses communautés culturelles. La Bulgarie, la Russie, la Côte d'Ivoire, l'Algérie, le Salvador, le Maroc et le Québec se côtoient sur la scène. Pourtant, Mouawad n'a jamais rien déclaré sur le multiculturalisme, ni fait valoir cet argument pour expliquer ses choix artistiques. En fait, il semble vouloir, au-delà du discours, établir la normalité d'une pratique multiculturelle. Chose certaine, le public montréalais le suit dans ses choix : le Colonel Oiseau et le Mouton et la Baleine ont tous deux joué à guichet fermé. ■



Paul Lefebvre est metteur en scène et traducteur. Il Enseigne à l'École nationale de théâtre et occupe le poste de directeur littéraire du Théâtre Denise-Pelletier

Casting Shadows:

The South Asian Youth Action Project | Edward Little



The South Asian Youth Action Project (SAYA) represents a partnership between Teesri Duniya Theatre, the Drama for Human Development Program at Concordia University (DFHD), and community-based organisations including the Centre d'études et de recherche sur l'Asie du sud (CERAS), the South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC), and the Quebec Hindi Association.

Through these partnerships the project hopes to use theatre to effect and consolidate links between Canadian South Asian youth across historic religious and/or cultural differences, and to provide a basis from which to continually renew these links.

The project's acronym "SAYA" ("shadow" in Hindi) evokes some of the challenges facing the project: multiple "shadow cabinets" of youth approaching their term as adult leaders of their respective communities; young eyes and ears observing and judging the struggles of current approaches to Canadian multiculturalism from the wings; and the all-too-common relegation to the background of legitimate concerns of young Canadians who live in the shadows of conflicts between ancestral and contemporary cultures.

In focusing on the situation of South Asian youth in particular, the project seeks: to create theatrical and other arts-related activities inspired by the social and cultural experience of South Asian Canadians, but reflective of the collective diversity of contemporary Canadian culture; to highlight issues and concerns of South Asian communities through the direct involvement of young people of South Asian origin living in Montreal; to develop a model which will allow community and vocational artists to interact and continuously develop and promote new and emerging artists and art.

The Development Phase

SAYA is being seeded with \$10,000 in start-up funding from CERAS. Launched in January 2001, the entire project will involve extensive community outreach and recruitment and take over 18 months to complete. All aspects of the project are being undertaken under the auspices of a volunteer (Steering) team of community members which includes participating youths, representatives from the stakeholder organisations and members-at-large.

The basic project will involve ongoing training in theatre skills undertaken by Teesri Duniya Theatre and Concordia University. The training will include workshops in improvisation, performance creation, storytelling,



mask-making, and dance movement, numerous short presentations, and a few large showcase performances in venues of social and/or cultural significance. As more community members get involved, the project envisions additional and ongoing cultural research and education, workshops in cultural sensitivity, experiential job "shadowing," discussion forums, photographic displays, films, creative writing and so on.

The Youth Action Team

In these initial stages of the project, one of SAYA's first priorities is to establish a "Youth Action Team" representative of as many diverse South Asian national backgrounds as possible. This core group is being selected based on their level of interest and their potential to train as youth leaders and peer educators who will draw ever-increasing numbers of youth into the project.

The formation stage of this training involves participation in a Theatre with Diverse Populations class in the Department of Theatre at Concordia University. Using a peer-oriented model under the guidance of Professor Rachael Van Fossen, upper-level Drama for Human Development students (as part of their respective training) are working with the Youth Action Team to develop and enhance theatre skills pertaining to animation, group building, and the identification and exploration of issues of concern to South Asian Youth.

A primary goal of the work with the Concordia students will be to provide the Steering Team with a set of recommendations about how to design and implement the project in a way that excites youth, draws them into explorations of issues of concern to them, and allows youth to express their own perspective(s) on these issues.

The Shock Troupe

Following this initial training, the Youth Action Team will begin working with Teesri Duniya's "Shock Troupe", an intergenerational corps of community "actor-vists" led by Rahul Varma and myself. The Shock Troupe was created to connect artists to communities and to explore developmental opportunities for community, emerging, and professional



artists which work symbiotically with Teesri Duniya's mainstage programming. The troupe's mandate (reflecting that of the company) is to produce high quality, highly mobile, and adaptable theatre which: provides a culturally democratic outlet for creative expression which addresses issues of concern to community participants; confronts the institutionalised marginalisation of popular community-based theatre practice; explores the creation of new aesthetic forms grounded in social and cultural diversity; and provides an enriched understanding and appreciation of the role which theatre can play in society.

The Shock Troupe functions along the lines of a "living newspaper" by: serving as information gatherers, messengers, and liaison for the company's community-based projects; informing the public about social and cultural issues relating to the company's programming; and creating and performing public interventions and travelling "edu-prop" theatre presentations to community organisations and groups.

The Shock Troupe is at the very core of the project, serving as primary messengers for SAYA (and future community-based projects) through the creation and performance of travelling "edu-prop" theatre presentations to diverse community organisations/groups in various locations on, and around the island of Montreal. In this manner, the integrated Shock Troupe (including the Youth Action Team) will recruit even more participants prior to the final "showcase" presentations, and play a key role in the creation and realisation of these performances.

Workshops, Seminars, Exhibits . . .

To complement the activities and training undertaken with the Shock Troupe, the Steering Team will plan and implement a number of interdisciplinary educational and training events. These are envisioned to include workshops, seminars, exhibits, and the like. Planning for a number of the workshops is already underway. To date these include:

- workshop in improvisational skills led by various members of the Shock Troupe,
- an "Urban Tales" led by Paul Lefebvre, and featuring intercultural and intergenerational story-telling focusing on the urban experience,
- A series on creative playwriting, led by Rahul Varma,
- A "Culturally Specific Mask Workshop," led by dancer, playwright, actor, and mask designer Anana Rydvald,
- A contemporary dance workshop, led by Roger Sinha, the Montreal-based dancer/choreographer whose work "combines Indian roots and North American reality."

The project is very much about encouraging volunteerism, community participation, mentorship, and "seva" or service. The number and range of any additional activities leading up to the final showcase performances will be in response to the possibilities imagined by community members who join the project to share skills, time, and resources.

Challenges

Many of the issues the project expects to deal with are both complex and controversial. For the youth themselves,

we expect issues surrounding culturally defined notions of sexuality, sexual behaviour, and marriage will be significant. Parental concerns around premarital sex, cross-cultural and interfaith relationships and marriages, combined with a persistent taboo surrounding sex education and family discussions of sexuality are an everyday reality in the lives of many South Asian young people.

A common concern voiced by members of stakeholder organisations, on the other hand, is the biased nature of certain religious and cultural resources which largely dominate the "South Asian" experience available to these youth in Canada. Some project stakeholders not only cite the limited nature of these resources in terms of immediate social relevance, but they also voice a concern that impressions left by these resources may even hinder South Asian youth from assisting their parents' generation to make the transition to Canadian society, or from becoming fully participatory members of a multicultural society.

Other issues, such as those of more immediate concern to organisations like SAWCC, include literacy, discriminatory immigration policies, trafficking in refugees, and historically taboo subjects such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, and the empowerment of women.

A particularly complex set of issues involves the possibility of negative role-modeling occurring in the homes of many of the most marginalised. According to community worker Dr. Hiteshini Jugessur, many new immigrant families and almost all refugees families in Quebec face institutional and systemic problems stemming from resources that are either inadequate, inaccessible, or ill-conceived in their delivery. For refugee families in particular, lack of employment, and restricted access to education, health and social services while undertaking the transition to Canadian society often leads to depression on the part of parents. This leads to a chronic sense of helplessness, a failure to seek further education and/or language and occupational training, ongoing dependency on social assistance, and self-perpetuating marginalisation from more established members of the South Asian community in Canada.

Of course, the kinds of issues and problems identified as facing Canadian South Asians are by no means restricted to this population. They are, in various configurations and degrees, evident in mainstream, minority, immigrant, and socially marginalised populations alike. Furthermore, for any population, the very act of naming complicity in such problems runs a very high risk of contributing to stereotypes and further isolation and division. To effectively use theatre arts to open lines of communication around such issues in non-threatening and non-confrontational ways is but one of the challenges facing the South Asian Youth Action Project. Informing, sensitising, and assisting young peer educators and other participants to take both responsibility for, and leadership around such issues and problems will require considerable diplomacy, expertise, and support from members of stakeholder organisations.

The question of follow-up

As with most projects of this type, however, it is crucial to consider what happens after the culminating performances. As a theatre company undertaking this kind of work, we are exploring the feasibility of initiatives such as an "Interactive Media Team" which would involve youth with interests in new technologies who might not otherwise become involved with the project. This team would collect and disseminate information about activities and performances related to the project via web-based approaches which including writing, still photos, video streaming, etc. These activities would produce a tangible "scrapbook" record of the accomplishments of the project, and thereby serve as a means of follow-up through affirmation and post-project support, maintain channels of communication, and serve as a basis for planning ongoing activities¹.

For SAYA's community partners, the project presents an unprecedented opportunity to evolve a program of mentoring and dialogue about education, activism, and volunteer work, and to encourage youth to begin to take some responsibility for enacting solutions to problems within their communities (especially when they themselves may not be directly affected). This points to a central advantage of this model of community partnership - a theatre

company, rooted in the community, undertakes to function as a front-line communications link which employs art to raise the profile of community based organisations; educate the public both about the kinds of challenges facing the South Asian communities, and any services already in place; and forge new links through the use of art to create evocative, consensual, and non-threatening dialogue across difference.

The social success of the project will thus be measured, in large part, by the degree and nature of ongoing relationships between the youths, their diverse communities, and the community-based partner organisations. SAYA's artistic success will rest largely with the project's ability to inspire such action, and to communicate intellectually and viscerally the potential of theatre to produce more active and informed citizens who recognise the important role they have to play towards evolving, diversifying, and influencing the path of multiculturalism in art for the benefit of all Canadians. ■

¹ These activities are being explored in collaboration with Assistant Professor Michael Longford, a specialist in socially responsive design art at Concordia University.



Edward Little is a freelance director specializing in large-scale community projects. He is an associate professor of Drama for Human Development at Concordia University in Montreal.

Worldplay:



creating connections
through play readings

Lina de Guevara

I have lived in Victoria, British Columbia for 24 years. In all this time, I have seen few plays from Latin America, Africa or Asia produced in the city, and the odd play from a non-English speaking European country. Theatre audiences in Victoria are not very multicultural, so the choices regarding repertoire that artistic directors make are understandable. It is very difficult to get the public into theatres at best and staging plays from other countries is risky. Unfortunately, the cultural and artistic loss is huge.

Since 1988 I have been the artistic director of PUENTE Theatre in Victoria. Our mandate is to explore the immigrant experience in Canada. We write our own scripts based on the Canadian reality, but we haven't produced and staged nearly enough plays from our homelands.

In 1998 we started producing staged readings of international plays. We wanted to include the immigrant communities in the selection of plays and as actors. Unable to find enough experienced actors in the immigrant community, we decided to collaborate with mainstream theatre organisations. The Belfry Theatre agreed to host the readings, and together with Full Spectrum Productions, PUENTE started Worldplay.

Each year, during fall and winter, we organise four or five staged readings with the participation of local directors and actors. In four years we have presented sixteen plays: one Jewish play; one each from Cameroon, South Africa, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, Russia, Barbados and India; three from Chile and three from Nigeria. Five of these were specially translated for Worldplay and eight had never before been presented in Canada. We selected the plays carefully, taking into account several limitations: Some plays don't lend themselves to a

reading; others are unintelligible without being a familiarity with the cultural context; in some cases there are no good translations available, and so on. Nevertheless, we found many remarkable plays—well written, original, and profound.

We developed a special style for staging the readings. The plays are introduced by a presenter who explains the cultural and historical background of the piece. There is a reader of stage directions, while the actors are seated on stage. Every detail is meaningful: the way the chairs are placed, the slightest movement of the actors, subtle elements of costuming. Whenever possible we include a musician. The very simplicity of the reading helps to focus the attention on the words and the content of the play. Many excellent actors have been

attracted to collaborate with us and we've been able to do justice to some complex and entrancing scripts.

Worldplay establishes a personal connection between the plays and the immigrants. Rather than searching for scripts in libraries or through academic circles, we ask immigrants what plays from their countries they would like to see performed here.

As presenters we have writers, actors, translators and people connected with the play and the country of origin. In the case of the play *Mindaugas*, the presenters were a young couple from Lithuania who had studied with the author, Justinas Marcinkevicius, an important cultural icon in their country. The South African play *No one's died laughing*, by Pieter-Dirk Uys, was introduced by a recent immigrant

from South Africa, a psychologist of Indian origin, for whom the play had been an instrument in the fight against apartheid. *Mirad*: a boy from Bosnia, written by Ad de Bont from the Netherlands, was presented by a Croatian woman who spoke movingly about the tragic circumstances that led to the war in Yugoslavia. One of the members of PUENTE, Comfort Ero, is a Nigerian playwright. She introduced us to African theatre, particularly plays concerned with the status of African women. The fact that I am originally from Chile provided several choices from Spanish speaking countries.

Some of the readings have strongly mobilised the community. Such was the case of the Jewish masterpiece *The Dybbuk* by S. Anski, a pillar of Jewish culture. The interest displayed by Jews in Victoria in participating in this event as presenters, readers, musicians and audience was amazing. Three suitors: One husband, by Guillaume Oyono-Mbia from Cameroon, and other African plays provided motivation for many black people in Victoria to attend the Belfry studio. Similarly, the award-winning *Harvest*, an Indian play by Manjula Padmanabhan, brought many young people of Indian origin to the theatre.

The effects of Worldplay have been felt throughout the Victoria community. Every

Worldplay establishes a personal connection between the plays and the immigrants.

reading has been a powerful and unique experience, while the whole series painted a panorama of world theatre. The general public has been moved and entertained by plays from the countries of origin of immigrants that live in our city, finding connections with cultures that may have seemed alien before. Hopefully, Worldplay will also help create an environment in which artistic directors consider a more international repertoire, allowing us to enjoy more diversity on the stages of our city. ■

Lina de Guevara is artistic director of PUENTE Theatre in Victoria, B.C.

The MarshFire guild system:

mobilising community resources | by David Fancy

The 75 members of MarshFire People's Theatre Company in Sackville, New Brunswick presented a seven night run of The Great Big Mosquito Show in August, 2000. The project involved people from varied backgrounds- from actors and dancers to painters and musicians, as well as educators, therapists, meditation teachers, reiki practitioners and convicts.



We especially targeted for involvement youth at risk of becoming dependant on government social services. A space in a local foundry was converted into a temporary theatre, and people from local cultural constituencies, including anglophones, francophones and aboriginals, gathered to stage stories from a particularly turbulent time in the region's history.

Creating the generous space

MarshFire's principle objective is to stimulate community health by creating a "generous space" for local populations. Both physical and emotional, creative and ideological, this "generous space" was envisioned as being a place of collaborative creative exchange between individuals of differing socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, of all ages, abilities and interests.

To create the "generous space", we engaged in partnerships with a variety of cultural and educational organisations in order to offer mentorships and youth training programs. This permitted us to eventually provide free open workshops

in music, puppet-making and performance to members of the general public. A detailed account of this generous space, including an in-depth discussion the project's other generative concepts (deep storytelling and intimate interculturalism) and testimonials from project participants, will appear in the Spring 2001 edition of Canadian Theatre Review.

Being an entrepreneur

MarshFire also engaged local business and financial establishments to request funds for the project. Now, although the end result of the project was intended to be something beautiful, lyrical, prophetic, critical, fun and participatory, it wasn't long before I realised that 85% of the labour would be entrepreneurial grunt work. Not without its charms and benefits (such as having to describe your event over and over, all the while gradually getting a clearer picture of it yourself), this kind of promotional work occasionally risks pulling you off-course.

The key was to describe the project in language that those whom we were addressing could relate to, but avoid

getting caught up in the assumptions implicit in that particular discourse. Obviously, each funder had a specific desire they wanted fulfilled in giving us money. For example, we received funding from foundations whose objectives are community-oriented philanthropy, from provincial millenium funding bodies whose objectives were heritage celebration and from businesses who wanted to be part of something that was marketable and had a "buzz" to it.

The most eventful and fruitful discourse clash inside the company came when arts and market objectives met head-on, especially the problematic language of the staff of the marketing company who gave us a huge amount of promotional support. Terms such as "value creation", "target audience" and "brand recognition" can have an awkward resonance at best, but they began to sound somewhere between the hostile and the hilarious when used to plan the promotion of a community-based cultural event. Still, the marketers' contribution to the project was a determining factor in its success.

An early and determining partnership was that with a local training organisation which solicits Human Resources Development Canada funding for bilingual community integration programmes in south-eastern New Brunswick. Together, we applied for a Youth Services grant and were able to hire 14 people between 16 and 30 years of age to participate as the core group of the project.



Creating the guilds

Twelve months before the production, names were given to different groupings of professionals whose help would be necessary to create the event. We knew early on, for example, that we would need a lawyer to process our applications for not-for-profit incorporation and charitable status. And so The Fast Talkers' Guild was established "for all those dealing with the law and regulations". We formalised the system in the early stages by making a simple brochure which articulated MarshFire's objectives and introduced the concept of guilds. We then approached a local barrister and solicitor, explained that membership in the Fast Talkers' Guild would mean participation in a multifaceted arts-based community project and result in the recognition and fun associated with the (anticipated!) success of the event. The lawyer agreed, helped us with our legal needs, and the company became legally registered.

More guilds were established and positions filled: the Big Bills Guild for those involved with money (insurers, accountants and eventual bank sponsors); the Spellcasters' Guild for those involved in communications; The DigiWalkers' Guild for those involved with computers, and so on. Light doses of wit in the guild namings prompted intrigue in community, and our organisational legitimacy and currency as conversation piece was established.

Guilds served as a buffer

By creating the guilds, we managed to avoid the branding of our site, programme and advertising with corporate logos. We were able to use our own design environment and simply list sponsors when there was space. We tried to maintain the principle that we were inviting sponsors into an already clearly articulated space, both in terms of aesthetics and ideology, and so were largely able to get them to leave their corporate identities at the door.

In addition to having frequent tours of the work site for guild members and members of the public, we listed the guild groupings in the programme rather than simply displaying logos. We wanted to show the professionals and business people involved that they had an integral

role to play in the creation of the production and, by extension, the health of the community.

Inclusion a cornerstone

A quick look at the programme for the production demonstrates how the guild system brought together a broad spectrum of funders and gift-in-kind givers to the event, including wealthy benefactors, Correctional Services Canada and the local high school music department. As the guild system gathered speed, the business community rallied around the event and spoke about the project's eventual success with a certain amount of proprietary pride. Guild members frequently spoke out about the new perspective on the arts and on community development that they had gained through working on the production. In one interesting scenario, the designers from the ad agency expressed relief at their creative control over the advertising in what they called our "lo-fi" environment. We frequently spoke of the "generous space", and the concept itself became increasingly multi-valent, as guild members articulated their own take on the term to each other, to us, and to our public.

Also very important was the exposure of our so-called "marginalised" participants to "successful" professionals. A number of the youth became distinctly more positive about their own futures when they came in contact with the "successful" professionals. Similarly, the change of perception towards youth in the community is still playing itself out, but the core youth participants have all gained an increased sense of citizenship and freedom in a town they have, in some cases, been living in for nearly 30 years.

The Ethical Risks of the Guild System

We encountered, or at least flirted with, the major ethical difficulties of taking money from corporate and government sources. At the risk of denying the corporatist environment in which the whole event was situated, we democratized our articulation of the guild system by suggesting that everyone in the community had an equal if different contribution to make, be they a banker as a member of the Big Bills Guild, or a grade 5 band

member with the Floorshow Guild for volunteer performers.

If there was any corrective in the process for perhaps promoting the suspect notion of "the good corporate citizen", it lay in the redistribution of resources towards our clearly articulated "generous space". In this light, the collection of over \$200,000 in cash and gifts in kind over six months for a project without precedent in the region becomes more an act of alchemy or even Robin Hoodism than of whitewashing dirty dollars.

The final redeeming factor of taking money from a variety of potentially

The key was to describe the project in language that those whom we were addressing could relate to, but avoid getting caught up in the assumptions implicit in that particular discourse.

suspect sources was that we were able to offer ticket prices of \$5 and \$3, the total sales of which amounted to approximately 2.5% of our overall budget. This way, we were able to extend the fruits of our collective adventure as a gift to the local communities that had participated.

Three Major Strengths

A system modeled after the infrastructure that supported medieval Passion and Miracle plays had several strengths: inclusion of the giving participant in the project's "generous space"; the possibility of tracing the cause and effect of assistance by the sponsor; and the creation of a buffer zone between the sponsor and the organization.

In light of the above, then, we feel this model for community involvement is highly transferable, and is likely to work in most similar situations.

Contact David Fancy at davidfancy@hotmail.com for more information. ■

A boat of uncertain identity

by Paul Lefebvre



Le Mouton et la Baleine.
Text: Ahmed Ghazali.
Director: Wajdi Mouawad.
Assistant Director: Isabelle Brodeur.
Scenery, Costumes and Props: Jean Bard.
Lighting: Éric Champoux.
Musical Score: Michel F. Côté.
With Paul Ahmarani, Peter Bataklev, Saïd Benyoucef, Nazih Bouchareb, Pascal Contamine, Pierre Curzi, Gérald Gagnon, Jean-Denis Levasseur, Serge Marius Takri, Dany Michaud, Igor Ovadis, Danièle Panneton and Robert Vézina. A production of Théâtre de Quat'Sous (Montreal), presented from January 15 to February 17, 2001.

Le Mouton et la Baleine (The Sheep and the Whale) is not a perfect play. That's its strength. The feeling of completion experienced with a tightly woven play is ultimately harmful, inducing a satisfied state that interferes with our ability to reflect on what we've just seen. Le Mouton et la Baleine is Moroccan-born Ahmed Ghazali's first play, and the fact that he worked on the text with Wajdi Mouawad is interesting, because one of the features of Mouawad's writing is that he always refuses solutions that are obvious and expedient. Consequently, Le Mouton et la Baleine never sacrifices the power of evocation for aesthetics alien to its intent. Two main factors drive the piece: the author's precision of thought (he has an intimate knowledge of what he is talking about) and his innate sense of dramatic conflict. At the centre of each scene is a powerful, clearly defined issue.

Le Mouton et la Baleine takes place over one night. A Russian cargo ship is crossing the Straits of Gibraltar between Morocco and Spain on its way to Marseilles. In the middle of a storm, it runs into a small boat, drowning all but one of the many Moroccans on board who are trying to enter Europe illegally. The bodies of the dead are stacked on the deck. The lone

her - he, too, entered Europe illegally on a flimsy boat which, one night, made the very same crossing.

The drama unfolds against the backdrop of globalization. In a flashback, an American manager steps from a helicopter onto the ship to inform the captain and crew that their boat and contracts are now the property of Ocean International.

The author is thoroughly aware of what illegal immigration involves and invites us to explore its corrosive effect on the human spirit.

survivor remains, silent and petrified, among the corpses. When the ship's captain calls the British who occupy Gibraltar, he is told that it is not their jurisdiction. The British response is echoed by the Spanish. Finally, he contacts Tangiers, Morocco, and is told that nobody can take care of the dead because the Feast of Sacrifice is under way, an Islamic religious celebration during which each family slaughters, roasts and eats a sheep. The captain, anxious to get to Marseilles, cannot wait around for the feast to end.

The main story is traversed by a series of parallel plotlines. The sailors hunt down and catch an African stowaway who they know is hiding in the containers, then toss him into the sea (this practice is quite common because ships carrying illegal passengers are required to pay a penalty when they arrive at port). A couple is in crisis. The woman, Héléne, is travelling with her companion, Hassan, a man of Moroccan origin and long-time resident of Paris. Héléne, who wanted to return to France on a cargo ship because she felt it would be more "authentic", is shocked by the actual conditions faced by the stowaways, while Hassan relives a part of his past he has always hidden from

Precise language, no concessions to realism

Of paramount importance in Le Mouton et la Baleine is the text, the spoken word. The author's language is precise, without making any concessions to realism. He is thoroughly aware of what illegal immigration involves and invites us to explore its corrosive effect on the human spirit. There are some unbearable moments, such as when the sailors joke with each other about the Blacks they've thrown overboard. But there is also the point at which the lie on which all of Hassan's respectable European existence is based breaks the surface and a violent eruption occurs: as he goes through the list of all the people he and Héléne know who arrived in Europe illegally, the play takes on almost frightening proportions. The picture of the West as open is replaced by another: that of a place people have to break into.

Le Mouton et la Baleine constantly builds on the metaphor of the title. As the author writes: "The sheep is the South. There's something of the sheep in all people of the South, myself included: a herd mentality, a whiff of the victim and, ultimately, the tragic fate of the

slaughterhouse - massacres, genocide. On the other hand, I've learned to see people of the North, Westerners, as whales. A whale seems powerful and serene on the surface, but it's an illusion. There's nothing more fragile than a whale. It's the animal least able to defend itself. And the worst of it is that one morning the whale hurls itself up on a beach and kills itself. [...] The North and the South are the story of two parallel miseries. In the South, they kill each other; in the North, they kill themselves. One side burns in the flames of drought; the other freezes in the cold of solitude and indifference. There they die of hunger; here they no longer have any appetite."

Between the North and the South lies this boat of uncertain identity: a place suspended outside the world, but wherein all its tensions and contradictions are focused.

A place of evocative conventions

I will not elaborate on Wadji Mouawad's direction, except to say that, as usual, it

reflects a firm belief in theatre's power of evocation. For example, a man twirls a plastic tube above his head and suddenly we see a helicopter; the scene where the rite for sacrificing a sheep is described becomes the illegal migrant's execution; a few drums and flutes and we are magically transported to Tangiers... As always with Mouawad, the theatre is a place of evocative conventions, never one of illusion. And once again there is the tremendous organicity he allows his cast members: it is rare to see productions that belong so much to the actors. One senses that everybody on stage has completely assimilated the parameters of the show and is incredibly free. There's a feeling of complicity and involvement usually only found in collectives.

Mouawad is fascinated by the inexhaustibly human, but for him this includes politics, a facet generally excluded from playwriting in North America or else treated as an easily explained fact. He believes politics are decisive, but is wary of the analytical grids imposed by the traditional left. He prefers questions to answers. It is

also worth noting that he casts people from across the various cultural communities: actors from Bulgaria, Russia, Ivory Coast, Algeria, El Salvador, Morocco and Quebec work side by side on the same stage. However, Mouawad has never stated a position on multiculturalism or used the concept to explain his artistic choices. Indeed, he seems to want to get beyond the discourse and make multiculturalism a normal practice. One thing is for certain: the Montreal audience is right behind him in his choices: *Le Colonel Oiseau* and *Le Mouton et la Baleine* both played to packed houses. ■



Paul Lefebvre is a director and translator. He teaches at the École nationale de théâtre in Montreal and is the literary director at the Théâtre Denise-Pelletier.

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