

alt. theatre

vol.2, no.2 June 2002

cultural  
diversity and  
the stage





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Cover images from The 7th Mexican Pastorela Festival. Pictured from left to right: Raji Basi, Susa Oñate, Francisco Trujillo, Linh Trinh and Premtim Plakolli. Photo: Barbara Pedrick





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**Canadian Theatre Conference**  
 "Theatre in Society: Politics, Plays and Performance"

For the theatre community, 2002 was a year of convergence, with the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT), the Canadian Actors' Equity Association (CAEA), the Playwrights Union of Canada (PUC) and the Canadian Conference on the Arts (CCA) jointly holding their AGMs at Ottawa's National Arts Centre.

The theme, Theatre in Society: Politics, Plays and Performance, shows that Canadian theatre is reassessing its role in society from a political perspective. How can it be made relevant to society in a world torn by political upheaval, crises and events of historical proportions?

For the conference, the importance of such a reassessment was brought home by the events of September 11th.

The attack on the World Trade Center was traumatic for Americans. America's leadership sought to give quick remedy to the nation's anger and hurt. A war was launched against a country and security was tightened.

In the war, many civilians were killed or maimed in the bombing. They are neither grieved nor remembered in the West, highlighting a stupefying imbalance in the value assigned to human life.

Meanwhile, practices normally abhorrent to a democratic society have gained widespread acceptance. Citizens, immigrants, refugees and travelers of Arabic and South Asian descent have been arrested, held without charge or turned away because they fit the profile of the new terrorist, i.e. Arabic or Muslim, or with Muslim or Muslim-sounding names.

Elsewhere, many leaders have used the cloak of the "War on Terrorism" to settle old scores without risk of American interference.

Other key questions have also come to the fore. Could America's newfound vulnerability be explained by past foreign policy? Without lending credibility to the perpetrators of September 11th, it is reasonable to wonder whether global dominance and the willingness to place American interests first had not created dangerously deep pools of resentment.

In this climate, we feel the sentiments expressed in CAUT Bulletin, Volume 49, also apply to the Canadian arts community: "Given that a responsibility of universities is to encourage education and free and open discussion of issues of local, national, and international concern, particularly in this time of America's "war on terrorism" and the intense conflict in the Middle East, CAUT urges its members to promote informed debate, safeguard the right to do so, work towards peace and be vigilant to protect those who may be targeted by prejudices aroused or apparently licensed by these conflicts."

Rahul Varma, one of the writers of this editorial, tabled a motion at the PACT for an end to war, racial profiling and the occupation of Palestine, and for support for Israel's right to exist and for the Jewish Diaspora opposing the occupation. That motion was roundly defeated.

In this article for peace, we must again raise the question: Should the arts be proactive, drawing on and communicating the experiences of the communities with which they share the world, or be simply there to entertain?

Ken McDonough, Rahul Varma