

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"

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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?

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Ken McDonough, Rahul Varma



Herménégilde Chiasson and the Media

>Glen Nichols

Throughout his rich and varied career, Herménégilde Chiasson has remained adamant about his participation in the cultural affirmation of Acadia and his thesis that a people cannot affirm their collectivity until they have control over the cultural images from which that collectivity is constructed. In a paper he presented to the Assemblée générale annuelle de la Fédération culturelle canadienne-française in June, 1996 titled "Comment traverser le tain de notre miroir pour atteindre le paradis de la visibilité", Chiasson decries the way Acadian culture has to combat the images produced by externally-controlled media sources that often have an agenda contrary to the interests of Acadia, or at the very least an insidious and willful ignorance of Acadian realities.

The real problem comes, Chiasson explains, when Acadians themselves begin to suffer from the irreconcilable differences they perceive between the reality they are living and the images of themselves they are bombarded with in the media:

Les Acadiens domiciliés au Québec nous ont donné une image folklorique qui fait recette dans les médias et qui les a rendus visible sur le territoire de l'Acadie, au point où une grande majorité des Acadiens s'identifie maintenant avec cette vision exotique fondée beaucoup plus sur le mythe que la réalité. (*Comment traverser la tain...* p.10-11)

Chiasson rejects the folkloric view of Acadia because he claims it is promoted by people who no longer participate in or understand the realities of modern Acadia, and because it seriously hampers the development of a contemporary collective consciousness based on those realities. Both genealogy and folklore stress the linearity of the descent narrative and the hegemony of received interpretations of the past. These traditional images are then reinforced by a media whose simplifying tendencies numb Acadians' ability to perceive themselves or have others see them in realistic modern terms. Chiasson's dramaturgy responds to this by disrupting narrative expectations in order to open cultural space for a consciousness of modern Acadian collective reality.

In addition, and of particular interest here, he often incorporates media or journalist characters and references in his plays. These provide an interesting counterpoint to what he says about the media in articles and writing outside of the theatre. The use of media/journalistic characters also complements the "mediatized" structures of his plays, which frequently stress metatheatrical and auto-referential forms.

One of Chiasson's most popular recent plays has been the farce *Laurie ou la vie de galerie* (first produced in 1998). Disrupting the episodic structure of the play, and in consequence the superficial clichés generated by the main characters, are three unrelated and unexpected visitors, including, Ella Sincennes, a Radio-Canada-Montréal journalist who wants to collect Acadian accents for broadcast during the "une heure [après la fermeture des émissions!] pour la Fête nationale des Acadiens." She explains how "Une fois par année on vous doit bien ça et puis notre mandat nous y oblige alors nous essayons de joindre l'utile et l'agréable" (*Laurie* p.22-3). The scene is peppered with verbal slapstick as the characters misunderstand each other's words. For example, "Saint-Coeur" is mistaken for "cinq heures" and "moton" for "mouton". The guys don't understand "térasse"; Ella doesn't understand "galerie" or "bundle", "patchet", "cagnotte", etc. Her difficulty understanding their accent reinforces the idea that she is totally out of place in this milieu clearly controlled by Laurie who, with the help of his soon-to-be son-in-law, Euclide, manages to dupe the uninformed media by giving the reporter a folksong more

"folksy" than she asked for.

Indeed, like Euclide's performance of the fake folksong which mixes "toutes sortes de mots de folklore qui font ni queue ni tête" (*Laurie* p.23), but which the Montreal reporter finds "merveilleux", the play as a whole becomes a complex representation of a "performance" of Acadia. The clichés espoused by *Laurie* and *Euclide* become "performances" of what others find "merveilleux" about Acadia, but which Acadiens are empowered through humour to recognize as not real, as stereotypes conceived and promoted by outsiders with little sense or understanding of contemporary Acadia (or willingness to gain such an understanding). The reporter epitomizes Chiasson's vision of the Quebec media with her superficial understanding of Acadia and insistence on promoting simplistic and unrealistic images.

The potential of broadcast media to distort reality is also underscored in *Aliénor* (first produced in 1997), where Françoise's news reports on the trial of Étienne Landry, who has been accused of sexually abusing his teenage daughter, are performed downstage and simultaneously projected on a large upstage projection area.

Significantly, the audience witnesses the sometimes rather ineffectual media filtering of events since it sees both the trial itself and her reports on it. The ironic gap which grows between the perceptions of events, ours and those of the media, are pressed home by Françoise's final words of the play, which also re-implicate the community's collective role in the events depicted onstage.

By this point the unconventional Étienne has been cleared of the charges, and his accusers, four upstanding men of the town, have been found guilty of the rape of Aliénor but have been given only a very light sentence despite the violence of their crime. Françoise explains this clemency by citing the judge who "s'est basé sur le fait qu'il s'agissait là, pour les quatre hommes, d'une première offense, de même que sur l'estime que leur porte, ou peut-être que leur portait, sait-on jamais, la communauté en général" (*Aliénor*,

p.99). By addressing the audience directly, especially in the character of a news reporter, Françoise's comment on the "communauté en général" comes to signify not only the fictional community of the play, but also the community of spectators in the theatre, the Acadian collectivity that Chiasson is so consciously writing about and for.

The link between the media and the community is not a simple one. By making it clear that the "community" has a role in the construction of reality, Chiasson resists casting simple blame on the media itself despite its clear fallibility if not culpability in the false construction of cultural perceptions. Françoise's final words imply the responsibility of the collectivity to likewise resist simplistic acquiescence to mediatised "truths", and points to the importance Chiasson puts on the assertion of new, contemporary, and collective mythologies.

The re-evaluation and reconstruction of myth is a central aspect in one of Chiasson's most recent works, *Pour une fois* (1999). The episodic plot involving Charles Lanteigne and his family becomes a metaphor for the history of Acadia from its beginnings with Champlain through to an uncertain date in the (near?) future. However, the mythic, traditional story is completely subverted by the postmodern questioning of that story through the focus on the personal journey of Lanteigne and the mediatised framing scenes which focus on the political future of Lanteigne's wife and of the Parti Acadien. The traditional folkloric and linear story of Acadia is reconfigured into new mythic material through a complex auto-referential depiction of modern Acadian cultural realities.

The strongly metatheatrical dramatic structure of *Pour une fois* is built around a prologue/epilogue which depict the journalistic "reporting" on the political events framing the story of Lanteigne. In *Pour une fois* the election-night reports serve as an introduction and conclusion to one aspect of the play's plot: Jeanne Lanteigne, who, motivated to enter politics by her husband's incarceration in a mental hospital, wins a seat in the Parti Acadien government.

In a larger sense the political victory is also the (wished-for?) conclusion of the long historical battle of the Acadians as depicted metaphorically by Lanteigne's personal escapades. It is not possible simply to sit back and be amused by Lanteigne; the "media-theatrical" element forces the spectators to consider their personal and political implications in the future of Acadia, as well as the ways the media constructs the so-called reality.

Chiasson's uses the metaphor of the mirror as his way of explaining the difficulty and importance of critical self-reflection in the development of a modern and effective collective cultural self-consciousness for Acadia. Chiasson's immediate interest is of course his own people, but his attitudes and approach to integration of dramaturgy and cultural awareness go well beyond the frontiers of Acadia:

*Peut-être serait-il intéressant de voir en quoi ce miroir a des répercussions sur notre image, non seulement dans notre réalité mitoyenne de francophone exclu, mais en tant que phénomène universel et existentiel. (H. Chiasson, *Comment traverser le tain...*, p.4)*

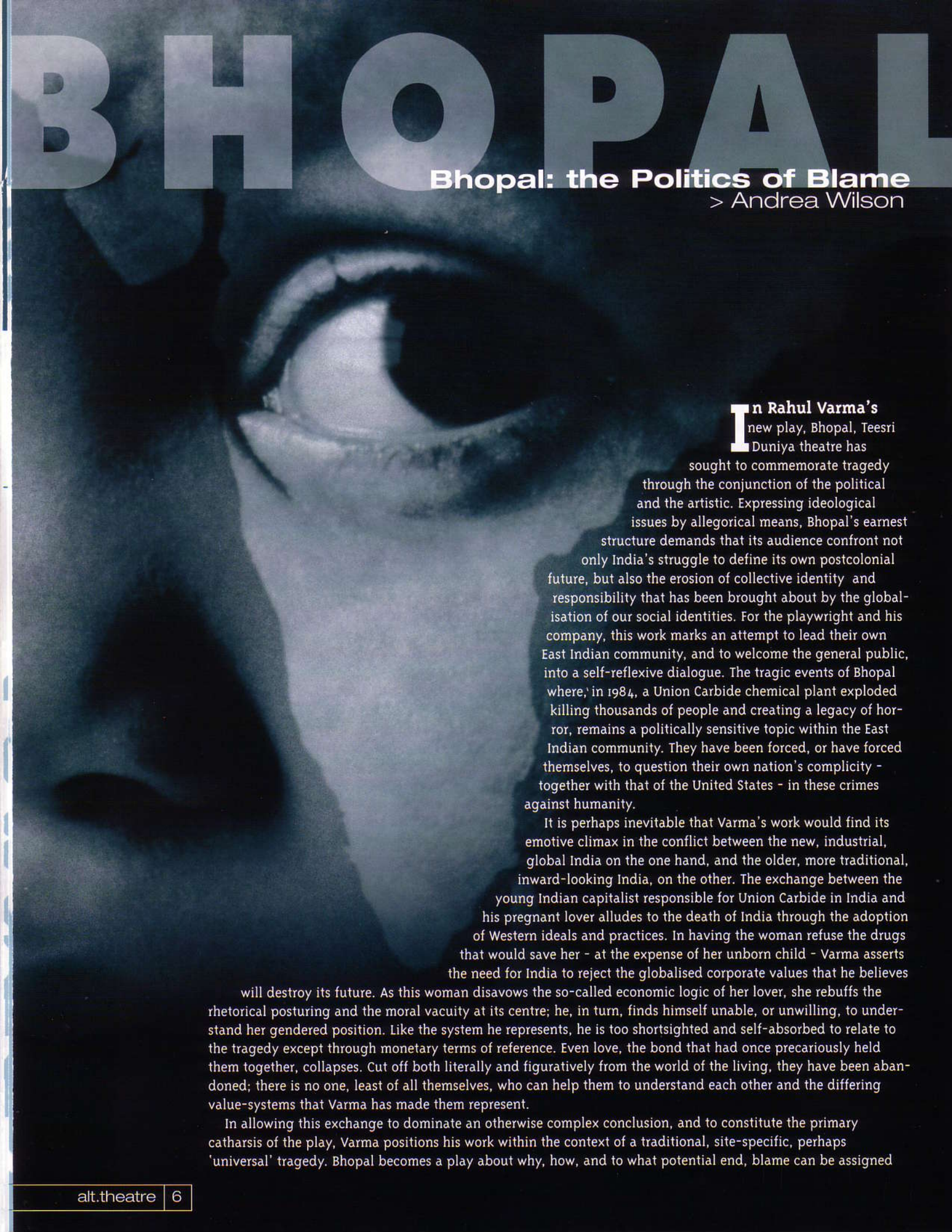
In an age of increasing pressure to accept the globalized model of modified culture/entertainment, perhaps his plays speak to all of us about how we can build unique theatrical and artistic mirrors that reflect particular cultural identities back to an audience that is increasingly confronted by images constructed elsewhere, by those with little awareness of or interest in the local or regional identities. ■

Glen Nichols teaches drama and Canadian literature at the Université de Moncton. He is founder and coordinator of LIVEWIRE Theatre Network and is currently translating five contemporary Acadian plays for publication early in 2003.

BHOPAL

Bhopal: the Politics of Blame

> Andrea Wilson



In Rahul Varma's new play, *Bhopal*, Teesri Duniya theatre has sought to commemorate tragedy through the conjunction of the political and the artistic. Expressing ideological issues by allegorical means, *Bhopal*'s earnest structure demands that its audience confront not only India's struggle to define its own postcolonial future, but also the erosion of collective identity and responsibility that has been brought about by the globalisation of our social identities. For the playwright and his company, this work marks an attempt to lead their own East Indian community, and to welcome the general public, into a self-reflexive dialogue. The tragic events of Bhopal where, in 1984, a Union Carbide chemical plant exploded killing thousands of people and creating a legacy of horror, remains a politically sensitive topic within the East Indian community. They have been forced, or have forced themselves, to question their own nation's complicity - together with that of the United States - in these crimes against humanity.

It is perhaps inevitable that Varma's work would find its emotive climax in the conflict between the new, industrial, global India on the one hand, and the older, more traditional, inward-looking India, on the other. The exchange between the young Indian capitalist responsible for Union Carbide in India and his pregnant lover alludes to the death of India through the adoption of Western ideals and practices. In having the woman refuse the drugs that would save her - at the expense of her unborn child - Varma asserts the need for India to reject the globalised corporate values that he believes will destroy its future. As this woman disavows the so-called economic logic of her lover, she rebuffs the rhetorical posturing and the moral vacuity at its centre; he, in turn, finds himself unable, or unwilling, to understand her gendered position. Like the system he represents, he is too shortsighted and self-absorbed to relate to the tragedy except through monetary terms of reference. Even love, the bond that had once precariously held them together, collapses. Cut off both literally and figuratively from the world of the living, they have been abandoned; there is no one, least of all themselves, who can help them to understand each other and the differing value-systems that Varma has made them represent.

In allowing this exchange to dominate an otherwise complex conclusion, and to constitute the primary catharsis of the play, Varma positions his work within the context of a traditional, site-specific, perhaps 'universal' tragedy. *Bhopal* becomes a play about why, how, and to what potential end, blame can be assigned



Andrea is currently finishing her B.A in Art History at McGill. Originally workshopped as part of a seminar class on theatre criticism, this piece owes much to the support and editorial advice of Prof. Denis Salter and the members of 110-499A.

to Western capitalism and to those in India who have unquestioningly welcomed its promises of material benefits. To enact dramatic closure at this point, however, through the actions of two defeated characters, is to assume that globalisation is an omnipotent reality that cannot be resisted; that both guilt and innocence ought to be assigned equally to everyone; and that catharsis is an effective, if all too fleeting, exercise in intervention that can bring about collective feeling and understanding.

Yet Varma's moral concerns about the impact of globalisation are almost too limited by the kind of dramaturgy that he has chosen to create for his own purposes. His characters are often not human beings, but paradigms for transnational behaviours. The Western NGO doctor, for example, is science incarnate. Her every action and decision are determined by her unrelenting quest for pure

If blame lies not just the West as a place, but with the West as a discursive idea, and if blame is nowhere yet the responsibility of everyone everywhere, how do we even begin the dialogue?

quantitative outcomes. Like research itself, she denies the existence of social, cultural, racial or gendered boundaries. Bound by their paradigms, all the characters of Bhopal are inflexible and one-dimensional; despite, or perhaps because of, their physical proximity—we see them within a series of mobile semi-opaque screens that mark the every-tightening, yet almost intangible barriers created by the international marketplace—they cannot understand one another. Although they speak the same language, and although they are all dying within the same lethal embrace of global capitalism, they cannot communicate; since their ideological differences remain too disparate and their political differences too conflicted, they cannot act together to bring about change.

Given that globalisation has reformulated human identity so extensively that the universal humanity that once bound us together has been violated, I am left wondering where and with whom responsibility for re-humanising the world lies. I refuse to believe that the fable of globalisation assumes for its participants as much guilt as innocence or that it is so powerful that, paradoxically, it is ultimately resistant to ethical engagement and reconstruction. Yet it is these assumptions, reinforced by the play's conventional, cathartic ending, that make the type of interrogative dialogue that Teesri Duniya wants to stimulate so problematic. The company has scheduled, to coincide with the production, a series of para-the-

atrical events at the Montréal Arts Intercultural (MAI). These events, including a multi-media art display, a political presentation entitled "options for action," and a variety of thematic post-production workshops, such as the one that my McGill University seminar, 'Practising Theatre Criticism,' was privileged to participate in, are all put together in the hopes of creating a physical site, outside of the theatre, for dialogue.

Yet is it possible to bridge the gap between the incommensurate moral positions of the play's characters and the beliefs of its disparate audience members? Perfectly aware of what each character is trying to say, the audience can all too easily occupy subject-positions both inside and outside of the action. For the non-Indian audience in particular, it becomes possible to look from a very safe and privileged (albeit guilty) position with detachment and concern at what seems to be

someone else's internal debate and tragedy. Feeling very much like an intruder in someone else's home, for me the textual and receptive dualism of the work creates a space between Indian and non-Indian audience members that mere sympathy seems unable to transcend. As a result, I found the post-production conversation very awkward, not only because the audience was trying to understand (un)common symbols—a well-intended process that can nonetheless lead to discursive confusion—but also because this dualism tends to reinforce barriers between the East Indian community and the general public, barriers that Teesri Duniya consistently seeks to deconstruct.

In a play about responsibility and blame, how can I, and by extension the members of my McGill seminar, overcome our own parameters to engage in and contribute meaningfully to something which lies beyond our experience? Moreover, if blame lies not just the West as a place, but with the West as a discursive idea, and if blame is nowhere yet the responsibility of everyone everywhere, how do we even begin the dialogue that both Bhopal and our seminar sought to achieve? Catharsis has opened up possibilities; but catharsis, by itself, is not enough. Where—and what?—is the common ground for political strategy, and what is the strategy that can unite us? ■

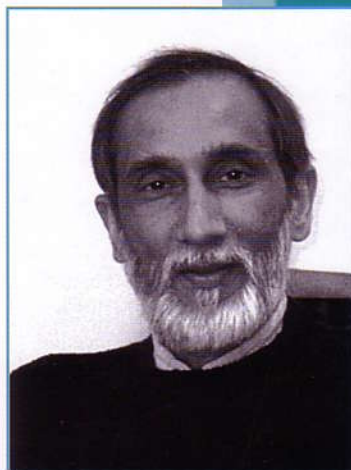
Bhopal



A scene from Teesri Duniya's Nov. 2001 production of Bhopal.

A listless cloud hangs overhead,
 A cloud of achievement and progress,
 Blotting out the stars
 And making people cry,
 Why can't we see!
 Why can't we breathe!
 A cloud so full of mischief
 That nobody knows,
 Why we make it in our midst.
 You say it brings food on our table,
 And makes children smile,
 Till the cloud of death passes over
 And they are no more.
 Mankind has to suffer
 For other mankind,
 And that's an answer hard to accept.

> Jayanta Gupta, Chicoutimi. Monday, Dec. 24, 1984



Jayanta Gupta is a professor of Earth Sciences at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and director of the Canada-China Project.

The Plains Cree Grotowski

Professor Forsythe of Brandon University's Drama Program documents the inaugural Native Performance Culture course as taught by Floyd Favel Starr.

> James Forsythe

In the summer of 2001, I invited Floyd Favel Starr to join the faculty of the Drama Program as part of the Summer Institute for Indigenous Humanities at Brandon University in 2001. The intention was for him to offer a course entitled "Native Performance Culture". It was Mr. Favel's second summer at Brandon University, after having taught the "Introduction to Native Drama" class the previous summer. At that time, discussions began concerning the issues of the cultural origins of actor training. This led to the creation of a course that would be both a training class and a research laboratory.

Floyd's intentions were to create a contemporary actor training methodology by exploring the following areas of work: narrative image and action in dramatic classical text; research into narrative action and image and gesture in Plains Indian sign language; research into narrative action in Plains Indian pictographic language; research into action and image in native languages, including Cree, Dakota, Ojibway, and Saukteaux. The pedagogical exercises developed would be based in the indigenous culture of the participants (which included both Natives and non-Natives)

In the last century the work of Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and his seminal work on image and action culminating in his book, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, revolutionised the training of actors. Floyd Favel Starr was one of Grotowski's last students at his training centre in Italy, and this course would be an attempt to combine that training with rudiments of his 'Native' culture.

Describing the work of his teacher, Floyd said, "Some years ago I dreamt that Grotowski died and we buried him in the graveyard on my reserve, where my grandparents and great grandparents are buried...From this dream I felt that I was to bury the work of Grotowski in the land where my ancestors are buried, to plant the work like one drives a cross into the earth." Floyd emphasised, though, that his work is not an imitation of Grotowski's, and that Grotowski encouraged his students to find their own way based on rigour and clarity.

It became clear that the thirty-six hours allotted to a three-credit course would



A scene from "He Thrusts Into Her" L to R Pauline Day, Hector Spence, Sija Tsai, Lila Wallace, and Patricia Jackson. Photo: James Forsythe

allow for only one of the four planned elements to be researched.

We agreed to concentrate on Plains pictographs as a starting point for the inaugural course offering, with other elements being added in subsequent sessions. Renowned Lakota artist Colleen Cutschall was brought in to assist in grounding the students in the history of this art form. My role was to record and document the classes and act as a trained objective eye that would provide a touchstone for the focus of the course for both instructors and students.

The first day of classes found Cutschall facing enthusiastic if somewhat confused students who each brought their own ideas of what "culture" and "art" meant in their community. She led them through a journey of her own creative process, detailing her internationally-shown exhibition *Voice in the Blood* as well as her current work on Tipi portals.

Pictographic art, according to Cutschall, is "a sacred text." In response to some students' argument that "it is not written", she argued that "it is written. It

is written in the drawings. Our sacred texts are in visual art forms." Floyd added that "pictographs are symbolic representations of a people's mythology, ceremony and history. Pictographs use images to represent action.

"These are spiritual drawings," Floyd continued, "and the style has to reflect what is beyond natural...Our life is based on stories, myths, legends and supernatural events. You can't express that with naturalism. So it's logical to develop theatre systems that reflect supernatural realities."

How this related to theatre in general and actor training specifically would be the focus of the next three weeks. The students would be applying the theory behind the imagery of Plains Indian pictographs to an adaptation of Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* - a pivotal book, according to Floyd, in both his own life and in his relationship with his mother.

Scott Momaday, according to Floyd, "was one of the first Native authors to reach a mass public audience, an author who managed to articulate in a contempo-



rary format the story of Native Americans. *House Made of Dawn* has images, actions and scenarios that speak to us today. It is also one of my favourite books, one that I read it to my mother after she suffered a stroke. She liked the story, and the readings would bring me to tears as the story became one about a life that had passed. I felt the contrast between the story one the one hand, and me and my mother's life and the urban surroundings we lived in on the other."

This would become the key to explaining what the student actors were about to do. The images from the novel were to become the starting points or catalysts for their own creativity. It wasn't to be class about performing a novel. Rather it would

Our life is based on stories, myths, legends and supernatural events. You can't express that with naturalism.

be about what interpreting that work of art gave rise to in each student.

The students were given five tasks: tell a story from the novel; draw a pictograph of the story; move and stage the pictograph; repeat the process with any images/stories that comes out of the original pictograph; write a paper on the relationship of your work in this class with Native culture. Success was to be measured in the students' ability to demonstrate an understanding of physical action and the pictographic system.

Having established the theory, it was on to the practical work, which, as in most theatre classes, meant grabbing a workout mat and finding a place in a circle on the floor. After some 30 minutes of stretching exercises and yoga the class moved on to some simple "transformation" exercises. Movement and gesture were first shared and copied, then transformed and

changed before sharing. This was done in a circle and then in two lines.

At the next class and all subsequent classes the stretching and transformation exercises would be repeated, each time asking for a greater level of commitment. There was resistance, but Floyd kept encouraging them, both by example and by side-coaching. There is no place to hide in an acting class, and everyone is a constant participant. Once the students realised that their own creativity would bring the only energy and novelty to the repetitions, the work improved. Evidence of the techniques practised in the floor exercises started to appear in the movement improvisations. The class gradually arrived at a somewhat unified physical vocabulary.

Starting to research First Nations actor training methodology with "body work" was natural. It was a return, said Floyd, to the Plains Cree philosophy that "Life is defined by movement, Waskawewin in Cree. A simple answer to the question 'What is life?' using the Cree language would be that life is movement."

Work began on physical improvisations in pairs. Movements would be shared, copied, transformed and shared again in a free flowing exercise. The students were gradually relaxing and beginning to allow intellectual judgments to be replaced by a "thinking with the body". This was then applied to the telling of the story of their pictographs. The first time they told the story, students were to just stand and tell it. The second time around, they began to interpret in a physical three-dimensional way the two-dimensional pictographs. The point of view of the storyteller was to oscillate vocally back and

forth from first to third person, and physically from the presentational to the metaphoric or symbolic. At every step Floyd was coaching them to increase the depth of their detail, both emotionally and physically. Stories were not so much to be told as danced or moved.

The next step was to delve into the emotional reaction of the teller to the story. Floyd instructed the students to meditate on their pictographs and to allow four related stories to inspire them to create smaller drawings on the same page as their big pictograph. The transformation of the pictographs from the page required the students to suspend their ingrained desire to be both naturalistic and illustrative in terms of the telling of a story. Floyd countered this with a combination of pointed coaching and encouragement.

"You have to make a clear choice," he said. "You have to make an artistic choice. You own body will create a pictograph. You need to start to isolate different parts of your body. Maybe this part is a cloud and this is a human person," he continued, pointing to his left arm and right leg, respectively. "Different parts of your body can be different things at different times. That's when your pictograph is going to move.

The students progress from hesitancy to confidence was due to two factors, exercise and repetition. The frequency of the transformation exercises had liberated and increased everyone's movement vocabulary. As the class progressed, gestures were bigger and contained more changes of dynamic and rhythm. The exercises created a 'technique' and then repetition made it 'natural'. Isolation exercises where different body parts do different things at the same time gave rise to the students' being able to represent several images in the story at the same time. For example, the movement of a right arm is the morning dew while the legs are those of an old man going to meet his son.



Photos: James Forsythe

Sija was one of the students in the class. Her story involved description of both terrain and of Abel's emotional, psychological state, and provides an example of the techniques of body isolation. As her legs become a river beneath the canyon walls of her arms, she switched from being outside to inside the story as she adopted the first person:

You watched the sun rise today. The town was dead with only the wind for life. There was a horrible accident. There were curved roads lying in the mountains. There was a huge canyon. The walls were very tall and there was a river running at the bottom. I can't think straight right now. My mind isn't very clear because I had too much to drink. My fingers are all twisted and I can't seem to bend them straight.

It thus became natural that if Sija was talking about the wind blowing through the town, that her body would tell us whether it was a lonely wind or a warm wind. And that her body, twisted and contorted, would communicate Abel's tortured state of mind in a half-conscious dream state.

The final step in the process was for Favel to put the stories together into a montage that could be viewed as a performance on the final day of classes. To do this he used Grotowski's 'collage' technique, which layers different (and sometimes disparate) images in a single scene, along with the fugue-like work of Joseph Chaikin's 'montage', where key images of a story are repeated both physically and vocally.

In the context of the class, while one student presented his story, the rest of the class was asked to choose a particular phrase and gesture from the performance. The story would then be repeated with the 'chorus' of students entering when their phrase appeared and repeating it until the end of the story. The effect was dramatic in

both cumulative volume and energy.

Floyd then allowed the pictographic system to inform the montage and composition, selecting actions and phrases to create emphasis and focus. He often asked three or four students to form a unison chorus of a particularly effective action. Sensitivity was in play as the central storyteller still had to maintain the focus.

Floyd drew a connection back to the original exercises of the session, and to his new role as master storyteller:

These exercises we've been doing...this is where we start to apply them. Now we are trying to construct images. Sometimes I might want a particular actor to shine so we give them room. And so, working together, we create soundscapes and "movement-scapes". We are working fast and we're working on the spot. We are improvising in a creative state. You have to react quickly and listen to each other. It's a bit like conducting. Don't be afraid. Just do the action. We're not asking for more.

Floyd selected several moments in the stories from the 'big' and 'small' pictographs of each student and arranged them in a running order that would constitute the final project. This was another big job for the students, as they strove to create new montage, essentially memorising lines and choreography from an evolving production.

The result was a marvelously entertaining and visually evocative distillation of several essential moments from *House Made of Dawn*. Actors flowed across the stage one moment and made up part of the chorus the next, as the action lifted off the page and took us out of the theatre and into Momaday's world. It was a result of the successful synthesis of the work of Grotowski and Chaikin with the pictograph system.

Floyd gave the students a rare lecture at the end of the class. "Culture is what you

think it is," he said. "It depends how you understand it. If you want to learn in depth any aspect of Native culture you have to learn it on your own. No one can teach you anything beyond the basic steps. No one can give you a gift. They can perhaps indicate that you have one. Often you get little signs. Even, for example, the gift of speech. I didn't understand that my speech was a gift for a long time. I dreamt that a voice told me that whenever I talked, my mother would live through my voice. You do learn to talk at your mother's breast after all. So then there must be a responsibility for what you say. Misusing a gift means not using it properly because in your voice there will be ancestors.

"Transformation in Cree means to 'change or switch quickly'", he continued. "If you put it in perspective of First Nations culture this is very common occurrence among our people. First Nations people have been transformed some at will and some suddenly. My mother, speaking of our home, said that when you are from here you have access to spiritual beings. When you are talking about theatre every Native artist gets into spiritual elements." ■

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Floyd Favel Starr is a Cree Indian from the Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan, and works primarily as a theatre director. He studied theatre at the Native Theatre School in Ontario, Tukak Teatret of Denmark, and at the Centro di Lavoro di Grotowski in Italy.

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The Aesthetics of Including Everyone:

Use of multiple languages and
South Riverdale Lives and Legends

>Ruth Howard



The date: February, 2001. The place: Lawrence Heights, Toronto. I find myself in front of a large group of East African women, promoting a theatrical storytelling project and trying to explain why they might enjoy being part of it. Most of the women don't speak English, and we proceed with multiple translations.

I instantly realise that I am out of my depth. I carry on, enthusing about storytelling, puppets, and music. I show my five-minute video of past projects, including a long clip from *South Riverdale Lives and Legends*, a theatre project that took place in a neighbourhood with a large Chinese population. Afterwards, there is some discussion between the women and their group leader, resulting in the comment that my video was "very Chinese." Did I realise, they ask, that there weren't many Chinese people in their neighbourhood?

Not for the first time, I have to remind myself that what is clear to me is not always self-evident. I hasten to explain that their project would reflect their own cultural backgrounds and stories. Everyone visibly relaxes and becomes more interested. I am, nonetheless, amused and rather flattered that anyone should mistake me for an expert on Chinese culture. I clearly remember, less than two years ago, standing before a large group of Chinese women, without a common language, and feeling equally at a loss.



Photo: Beth Easton

How do you stage a story in several languages? How do you incorporate and transform material from a culture not your own? How will the style and traditions of another culture interact with your own artistic sensibilities?

The *South Riverdale Lives and Legends* project raised several questions. How do you stage a story in several languages? How do you incorporate and transform material from a culture not your own? How will the style and traditions of another culture interact with your own artistic sensibilities? These are some of the aesthetic questions which exist alongside the social ones of how to get people to take part in the first place and feel at home, especially when they are already in a strange land. It is a long journey from these initial questions to a performable, inclusive piece of art. I don't know whether I have any transferable answers, but in *South Riverdale* we made the journey without capsizing.

The play's title was *Twisted Metal and Mermaid's Tears*, with the translated Chinese title being something like *Buried Treasure in the Junk*. It ran for four days in June 2000 in a park off Queen Street East. A collaborative project between myself and several local groups and agencies, the play had three elements: oral histories gathered in the area; a Chinese folk tale, and the visual and metaphorical environment of the Leslie



Photo: Michael Obadia



Street Spit, a landfill peninsula which has become an extraordinary urban wilderness. There was a volunteer cast of about 80 people, and a volunteer crew in the hundreds. Participants came from many countries, but the large Chinese population had a major impact on the project, evident in the participants, subject matter, visuals, music and languages of presentation.

At the start workshops were held with various community programmes, including a group run for Chinese mothers, some of whom spoke Cantonese, some Mandarin, few both, and almost none English. The women brought me pictures of their national dress and cultural symbols, which influenced the costume and prop designs. The musical director, Martin van de Ven, recorded their songs in order to incorporate them into the music he composed. As for stories, it turned out that, due to Mao Zedong's 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, the women did not even know family anecdotes let alone folk tales. Ironically, the traditional Chinese tale eventually chosen was told to the group by a white, American professional storyteller.

I feel that the project crossed cultures most interestingly in its use of multiple languages. One of my initial aims was for the play to be entirely multi-lingual in its delivery. As well as this being a strategy for the inclusion of performers and audience members, I was fascinated by the notion of narrating a story through several translations. I relished discovering

what had to be repeated, and what could be understood through nonverbal expression.

Though I have to say that we ended up diverging from this aim, I still imagine it to be achievable. Director Loree Lawrence was concerned about the piece being too cumbersome. She came up with the brilliant idea of creating a Chinese ballad, a stanza of which would be sung before each episode, and which would then be enacted in English or non-verbally. The resulting "story song", sung in Mandarin by Tony Xie, who had only been in Canada for two months, gave the piece a sense of ceremony and magic.

One of the professional artists involved was Diana Tso, a Lacoq-trained Equity actress who spoke English and Cantonese. Diana joined our core group of masked storytellers, providing a link for the Chinese participants and artistic support to the entire cast. On one occasion she performed a monologue, switching back and forth between Cantonese and English, based on the oral history of a local Vietnamese-Chinese woman.

The other bilingual scene in the show was performed by Lucy Fu, a recent Chinese immigrant who had never acted before. Ours was one of those tales in which two out of three brothers experience the same mishaps and the third brother gets it right. This repetition allowed the First Son's Adventure to be told in English, while for the Second Son's Adventure more or less the same narrative was repeated in Mandarin by Lucy, with

the cast performing similar actions each time.

In both of these scenes the bilingual storytelling added an original texture. Granted, I had an advantage in comprehension, being the one who wrote the play. I admit that these monologues were among the elements which made the play a bit dense and confusing. Perhaps, having lived in Montreal, I am comfortable with the ambling pace of constant translation, but I feel it is a dramatic style worth exploring, for both its artistic and social potential.

Now I'm here, almost a year later, facing a new group of women. I know embarrassingly little about their countries- most are from Somalia and Ethiopia- and the languages they speak. I talk, show pictures and a video, answer questions and leave. What will happen next? Will we ever create something together? I can't say for sure. All I have learned is to relax, not make assumptions and to allow myself to feel comfortable.

It must be asked, though, given my discomfort, why I am doing this. The answer is simple. Given the type of theatre I have chosen to practice, and considering the fact that I live in Toronto, I have no choice. I have learned to see it as my job not to exclude any person or any group. Aside from the principle, the aesthetics of including everyone are fascinating. Well, fascinating to think about- hard to bring about! ■

Ruth Howard is the founder and artistic director of Jumbies Theatre. She has been involved in the community play movement for over 10 years. Ruth is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada and the University of Toronto, and a member of the Associated Designers of Canada.

The 7th Mexican Pastorela Festival

>LINA de Guevara

In 1998, in my capacity as artistic director of PUENTE, a Victoria, B.C. theatre group by and for immigrants in Canada, I attended the Community '98 Congress in Havana, Cuba. One of the delegates was Arturo Morell, director of the Pastorela Festival in Mexico. When Morell explained that pastorelas were fables derived from the Christian tradition about the struggle between good and evil, I realized that they were similar to an Ethiopian story which we had just dramatized successfully for our play, *A Story Mosaic*. This gave us the idea that PUENTE Theatre could create a pastorela in Canada and present it at the first Latin American Festival of Pastorelas that Morell was planning for 1999.

The mandate of PUENTE theatre is the exploration through theatre of the immigrant experience in Canada. The main question we had to answer to produce a pastorela was: for the immigrant, what is evil and what is good? Exploring the questions and finding the answers theatrically would be the focus of our work.

Our play had to be written and performed in Spanish, and it had to consider the different language abilities of PUENTE's multicultural actors. I proposed the project to Jaime Silva, a Chilean poet and playwright, and the author of several plays

In the neighbourhood surrounding the convent demons, angels, burros, peasants, saints and archangels- characters in the different pastorelas- were wandering about.

with a religious theme. He knew the immigrant experience well, having lived in Montreal for several years. Through e-mail correspondence, a project developed joining the people and traditions of Chile, Canada and Mexico. The pastorela itself is an example of integration. It brings together the medieval Spanish Christian traditions with the indigenous Mexican celebrations. Modern pastorelas are also influenced by popular theatrical expressions as well as products of the modern communication media.

Aware of the novelty of this project, Arturo Morell decided to come to Victoria for two weeks to teach us the requirements of the pastorela form. We worked from a script-in-progress provided by the author and using PUENTE's rehearsal methods, which include the creation of images, physical theatre, improvisation, mask work and collective creation. Little by little the play was shaped and polished, until the Pastorela of Juan Tierra the



Left to right: Francisco Trujillo, Sebastian Mena and Lina de Guevara. Photo: Barbara Pedrick

Immigrant was completed. It was a poetic fable which told Juan's story. A young peasant driven by economic necessity to leave his family in an unidentified Latin American country, he takes his faithful dog as his only companion and sets out full of illusions of a better life. When he reaches his Never Never Land, his destination, the Devil, who appears in various disguises, attacks him with Fear and Doubt, tempts him to forget his roots, incites him to give himself over to untrammelled ambition, makes him fail and plunges him into despair. After many ups and downs, Juan,

aided by the Archangels and guided by the "Skeletons of his Grandparents", manages to find stability and the wisdom to accept his new life without losing his pride in himself and his identity.

The play followed the pastorela form. It told the story of a hero's journey towards a higher destiny and how the devil attempts to sidetrack him through different temptations and distractions. Many of the characters were traditional ones, essential in every pastorela: Lucifer and other devils, the shepherds and the archangels Michael and Gabriel. There were allegorical characters integral to the immigrant experience: Doubt, Fear, Melancholy, and a robot symbolizing Technology. Lucifer uses disguises such as that of an old woman, a malevolent Santa Claus or a flashy Television announcer with his helpers Miss Rich and Miss Waste. It presented situations well known to



immigrants, including having to work in dead-end jobs, falling into the temptation of denying one's identity, looking for easy money, forgetting one's family back in the homeland, finally acknowledging one's roots and claiming one's place in the new society. The scene of the Skeletons of the Grandparents, honouring Latin American mestizaje with the Indian grandmother and the Spanish grandfather, had great emotional impact. The end of the play gave a vision of Canada's multi-ethnic condition when the actors appeared dressed in traditional costumes from their homelands and the Archangel Michael wore a cape embroidered with buttons, a traditional garment of the Haida natives of the west coast of British Columbia. This image may be considered a cliché in Canada, but for the Mexican audience Canada's multiculturalism was new and surprising.

The Pastorela Festival took place in the former convent of San Lorenzo, in the historic heart of Mexico City. It is a reconstructed colonial building, with many patios which had been arranged as performance venues. The presentations began at 11 a.m. and went on all day. The groups came from the various Mexican states and from barrios of the City. The participants included all types of people: theatre professionals, students, seniors, trade unionists, blind children, police-women, hospital workers, even whole families. In 1999 PUENTE was the only foreign representative. In 2000 there were delegates from Peru, Bolivia and Spain. More

foreign participants are expected for 2001, and this time we hope PUENTE will again represent Canada.

In the neighbourhood surrounding the convent demons, angels, burros, peasants, saints and archangels- characters in the different pastorelas- were wandering about. It was surprising to see the many types of tails, horns and wings and the diversity of costumes which were, mostly, carefully conceived. The presentations were so numerous that it was impossible to see them all. We had to make do with seeing parts of several pastorelas and talking with the other participants. We were always received with great affection and respect. The "Canadians" were objects of great interest.

This essay is not the appropriate medium for an extensive analysis of the phenomenon of the pastorelas in Mexico. The Mexicans are the experts in the field. Mine is the vision of the visitor who came from another world for a moment to join this very singular one. The pastorelas I saw surprised me by their diversity, their colour and especially by how uninhibited they were. The irreverence was extreme. The archangel Michael was characterized as a wrestler and St. Joseph as a cuckold. There were gay saints, angels engaged in all sorts of sexual games and devils got up to extreme antics. There was no limit to the freedom with which the sacred subjects were interpreted. The devotion was expressed in the familiarity with which the popular genius dealt with the central themes of the pastorela. The pastorela always implies a discussion and a definition of good and evil. Some of the ones we saw made interesting philosophical statements about the nature of the two, while others focused on social and political criticism. Still others exploited the farce and the theatricality of the genre.

The pastorela was originally a powerful tool for evangelization, but its function is now changing. The Festival itself has become an instrument of social and cultural development. In providing a format and a space for the presentation of pastorelas it facilitates the organization of many groups. These produce a theatre piece and also have the opportunity to express themselves as a social entity. In

the play they can voice their demands, their criticisms and their affirmations. As far as I know, the only condition that needs to be met so that a group can be allowed to participate is that the play meet the basic conditions of the pastorela form. Wisely, the organizers think that providing the participants with the opportunity to see what others are doing will improve the work of the less experienced groups. The categories of "professional" and "amateur" mix with great ease in this place. The Mexican Festival of Pastorelas seemed to me truly a "space of freedom", limited only by the form, which of course implies the weight of tradition and religion. A possibility for the future is a festival in which the plays deal with the universal theme of the struggle between good and evil and which allows for the participation of non-Christian cultures. I think this would be an extraordinary cultural event.

The Pastorela de Juan Tierra el Inmigrante was welcomed with extraordinary warmth by the Mexican public. The audience seemed moved and flattered by the fact that we were using a form created by them. Instead of resenting it and accusing us of cultural appropriation, they considered it a homage. Many could identify with the problems of the immigrant, since there are few Mexican families who don't have at least one member who has emigrated to the North in search of better economic conditions. At the end of the presentation we received many embraces, requests for photos and autographs and invitations to perform in other neighbourhoods and towns. Our participation in the First Latin American Pastorela Festival was a positive exercise in theatrical and cultural integration and exchange, and it reaffirmed our decision to continue to be a wide PUENTE (Bridge) for theatre between nations. ■

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

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