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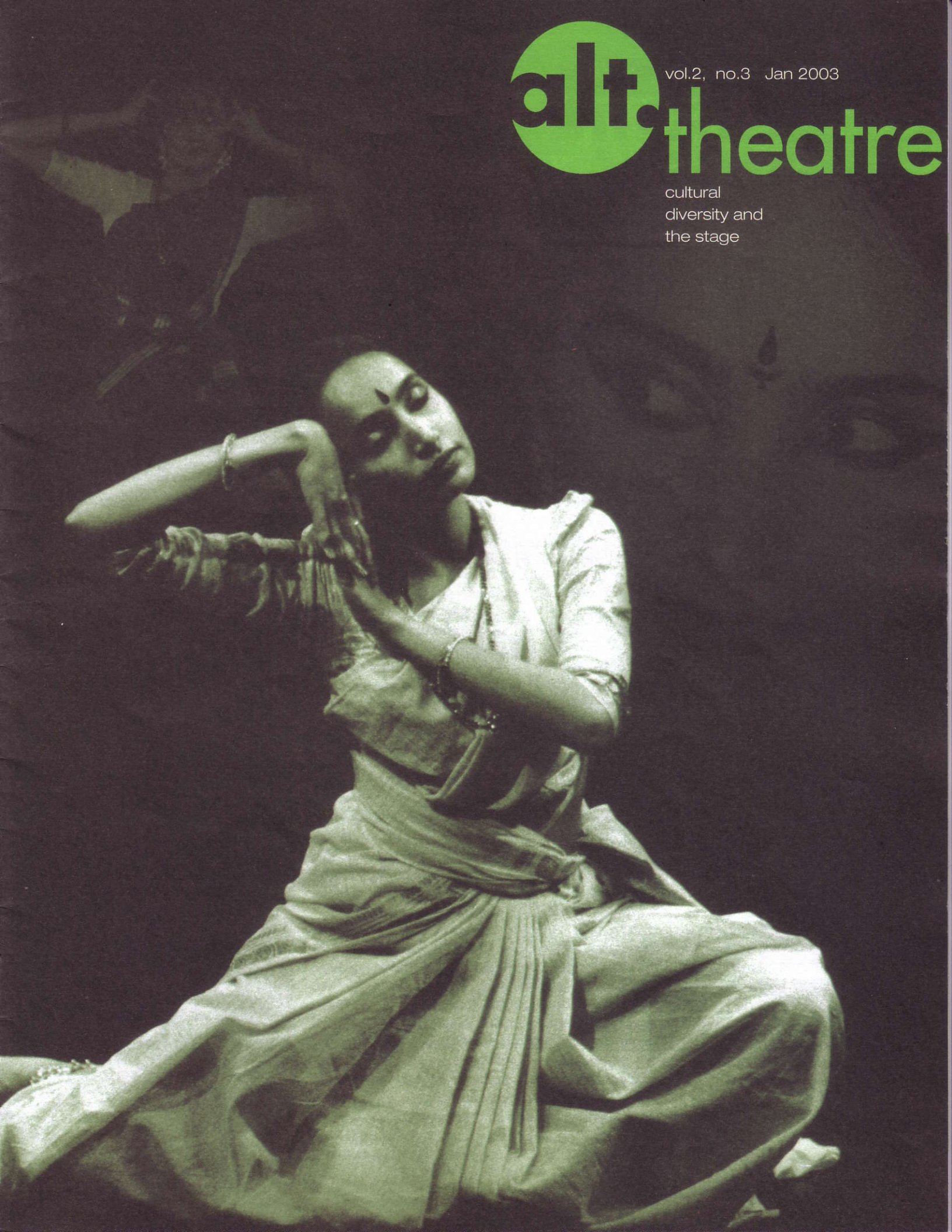
alt. theatre

cultural diversity and the stage



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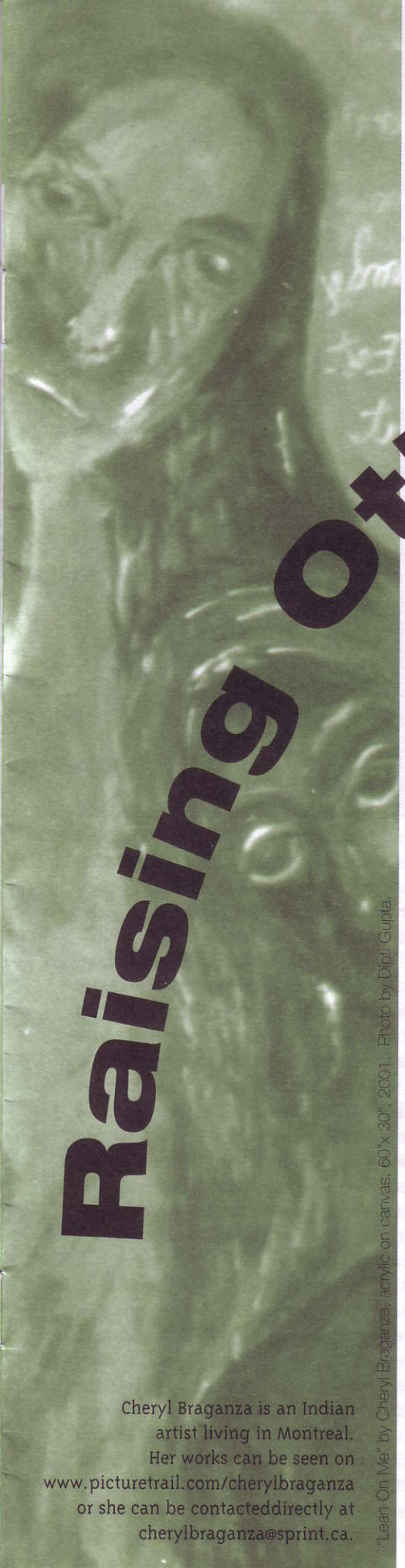


"Lean On Me" by Cheryl Braganza, acrylic on canvas, 60"x 30", 2001. Photo by Dipti Gupta

Cheryl Braganza is an Indian artist living in Montreal. Her works can be seen on www.picturetrail.com/cherylbraganza or she can be contacteddirectly at cherylbraganza@sprint.ca.

Editorial Feature:

by Rahul Varma

Raising Other Voices

In The Theatre Of The Giant

This editorial is the basis of a talk given at the 2002 Canadian Theatre Conference (Ottawa May 31 - June 1), and simultaniously published in "*Theatre in Society - Politics, Plays, and Performance*", Playwrights Union of Canada (ed. Angela Rebeiro). Parts of the original article have been revised

To renew itself, theatre must constantly reassess its current role in society and, with a view of the broader social landscape, ask itself what role it might play going forward into the future. Events before and after September 11th underscore the importance of this question. It is in this spirit that I would like to cast a critical eye on the arts scene in Canada and raise questions that I feel are urgent to its future: To what degree must the arts be proactive, drawing on and communicating the experiences of the communities with which we share the world? To what extent can we be content to support arts which simply provide people with a means of escape?

To make the arts meaningful, particularly in this time of America's so-called "war on terrorism", many artists, writers and art organizations have taken up the cause of promoting open discussion, working towards peace, safeguarding the right to free speech and protecting those who may be targeted by racial profiling aroused by the events of September 11.

Immediately after the unconscionable terrorist attack on the twin towers and America's retaliatory bombing of Afghanistan, director Wajdi Mouawad wrote a strong denunciation of the war in a Montreal daily and with his actors took to the street to protest. On the evening of September 11th, despite the fact that her play dealt with the subject of terrorism, director Stacy Christodoulou went ahead with her production. Director Kate Bligh organized a public forum at Concordia University, which consisted of students, professors, writers and artists. The forum discussed a wide range of issues related to world peace, and professor Denis Salter was one of the key speakers. In addition, there are many community-based organizations - Headlines Theatre, the Irondale Ensemble, and Teesri Duniya, to name a few - which regularly undertake theatrical projects dealing with a wide range of local, national and international issues.

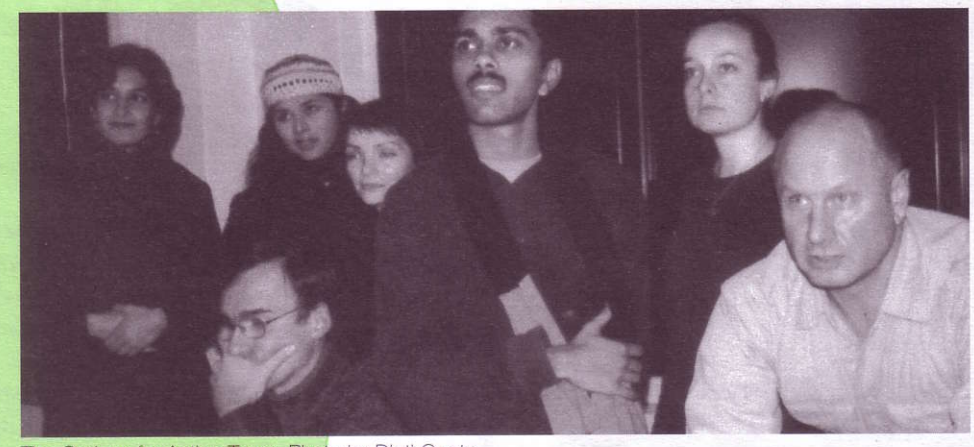
On the other hand, Canada's "established" arts organizations have been particularly unresponsive to historical events, social issues, or major crises - preferring not to rock the boat or to take sides. I would describe their overall attitude prior to and since September 11th (with rare exceptions), as "hands off". Major institutions like PACT, EQUITY, PUC and the CCA, have yet to issue a single communiqué to denounce the war. At this year's annual general meeting of PACT, I tabled a motion that called for an end to war, racial profiling, and the occupation of Palestine. The motion pledged support both for Israel's right to exist and for the Jewish Diaspora opposed to the occupation. The motion was soundly defeated. Participants at the meeting, which included artistic directors and general managers of theatre companies from across the country, instead complained about box office receipts and sent letters to the government pleading with it not to cut arts funding in spite of new military "needs." Prominent Quebec artist Robert Lepage, for his part, cancelled his show Zulu Times which involved an attack on an airport and which was scheduled to open in New York. (See forthcoming review in *alt.theatre 2.4*)

Clearly, the opportunities for artists to engage the public in a critical social debate have been many, and yet censorship, frequently self-imposed, seems to have been the order of the day. Only a few voices in the wilderness have articulated a critical or alternative viewpoint.

After September 11th, a newspaper cartoon appeared showing U.S. soldiers pointing guns at Taliban officials. The caption read, *"If you don't hand over Osama Bin Laden to us, we will send your women to school."* Had the Taliban handed Bin Laden over, would the US have ever cared whether Afghan women went to school? The irony is that before U.S. money, training and equipment brought the Taliban to power and established Bin Laden as a presence in Afghanistan, girls did study and women worked.

The attack on the World Trade Center was an unconscionable act. Yet, difficult as it may be at a time of collective sorrow, an unpopular question needs to be asked: Isn't what happened in America precisely what U.S.-recruited, - sponsored and - trained warlords, dictators and terrorists have been doing for years as part of America's proxy war in the Third World? In raising this issue, my intention is not to diminish what happened to America's victims of terrorism, but rather to sensitize people to the reality of U.S.-sponsored terrorism which has left its own bloody trail of victims. I need only mention by way of example the Allende assassination in 1973 and Pinochet's subsequent reign of terror. Or the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961. Or the millions killed in Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia by US forces. Or the more than 20,000 people killed during the 1982 US-supported Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Or the 200,000 Iraqis killed in Operation Desert Storm and the 500,000 Iraqi children who have since died as a result of U.S.-imposed sanctions. Or the thousands of Palestinians who have fallen fighting the Israeli occupation while the U.S. remains conspicuously silent at the U.N., or the millions of lives lost in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Haiti, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Panama. And this is just a cursory list.

Now, under the cover of rhetoric invoking "Infinite Justice" and "measured response," over a six-month period the US and its friends mercilessly hammered Afghanistan from the air, without once measuring the human loss or grieving for the lives that have been extinguished under their bombs. Nor have they respected the dignity of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who today fill the camps in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. On the contrary, in a gush of patriotic fervour, the White house has declared that "America is stronger than ever."



The Options for Action Team. Photo by Dipti Gupta

> Only a few voices in the wilderness articulated a critical or alternative viewpoint.

U.S. foreign policy is based on strategic deception. Misleading information and manufactured lies are used to cover up the country's history of domination and gunboat diplomacy. The mainstream U.S. media practices selective censorship in reporting U.S. actions in the Third World. It reports CIA-sponsored terrorism only when the terrorists have turned against their American handlers - and only after American lives have been lost. It therefore leaves Americans to react only emotionally rather than also objectively.

In the current emotional climate, criticizing the U.S. is somewhat dangerous, but the matter needs to be raised: What kind of war is being waged and who precisely is this enemy called terrorism? In the final analysis, this is a war between fear and fearlessness, which means the war was lost even before it began. On the one side you have a large population of ordinary people who are afraid and anxious and on the other side you have a handful of men who have no fear, especially no fear of death, which makes them all the more frightening.

This is not a war against terrorism. In any event, experience tells us terrorism cannot be eradicated through war. This is America's old itch to dominate, to show off its military might, and to test its allies' loyalties. This war's credo was summed up by Bush himself: "If you're not with us, you're against us." Rumsfeld was equally blunt: "Americans must be allowed to continue with their way of life." The goal is global military, economic and political homogeneity, and the U.S. media has deliberately kept the public uninformed and distracted, convincing it that there is an actual war, yet avoiding serious debate as to why it is being undertaken.

Terrorism is nomadic, without nationhood or national borders, and yet a U.S.-led war has been declared against terrorism on behalf of the American nation. While the war is supposedly aimed at terrorists, its sights have been bracketed, to devastating effect, on an entire nation. America is using the pretext of terrorism, which has no home, to mask its own form of state terrorism.

Terrorism is an outcome of one side's historical refusal to acknowledge and entertain dialogue with others. The term "terrorist" distorts the truth about the other side. For example, Mandela, Gandhi, and Allende were all once regarded as terrorists by the same powers that are, once again, deciding who is and who is not a terrorist. In the final analysis, terrorism is a symptom, not the disease; it has a cause, which it tries to advance using any possible

"Their Anguish, My Rage" by Cheryl Braganza, acrylic on canvas, 60"x 30", 2001. Photo by Dipti Gupta.

means. If the war against terrorism is to be won, we must address the cause in order to reject the means.

However, the thrust of American diplomacy runs counter to this rationale. For example, in better times (better for the U.S. at least), when Bin Laden and his associates were successfully executing the CIA's agenda against the Soviets, Ronald Reagan, compared them to America's Founding Fathers! Ironically, Reagan was not altogether off the mark, since America was made possible by the genocide of its original inhabitants. This is also true of Canada, of course, and it is this connection and confusion that permits Canada to ally itself with the U.S. even when doing so earns the government the distrust of its own citizens.

A case in point is Canada's reluctant participation in the Durban anti-racism conference. Durban, located in the country where apartheid fell, was the ideal location for such a forum. When some participants argued that Zionism was racism, Canadian public personalities and politicians attacked the conference's relevancy. The CBC's Rex Murphy called the conference "disgusting" and MP Irwin Cotler said it was the worst kind of anti-Semitism he had ever seen. Deputy Prime Minister, John Manly declined to attend, proclaiming that it had become a "racist anti-racist conference." The leadership of the Canadian delegation fell to Multiculturalism Minister Hedy Fry, whom the media portrayed as a directionless junior minister in charge of a low-level mission. Some right-of-centre organizations loudly called for Canada's complete withdrawal on the pretext that the conference had turned anti-Israeli. Doesn't this response mean that Israel matters, but not the lives of Palestinians, Africans, First Nations, Arabs and Black Canadians, among others? By not providing high-level representation, Canada displayed a lack of respect towards certain minority groups. While beating the drum of cultural plurality, Canada failed to act as a country cognizant of its own pluralistic nature. When it comes to racism, nobody can lay claim to the moral high ground. Racism does not have just one face, nor is it defined by a single vision. Canada's refusal to attend reflected and gave credence to the now familiar line of current U.S. gunboat diplomacy, namely "if you're not with us, you're against us."

Those of us who opposed the war and Canada's part in it warned that Canada could not simply hide behind words such as "peacekeeper" and "humanitarian aid" without sharing responsibility for the human misery in Afghanistan and the targeting of cultural minorities in Canada. A new status quo has emerged, typified by surveillance, control and restrictions. The racial profiling of Arab, Moslem and South Asian Canadians in screening out prospective terrorists has become - although Canada's domestic security forces will never admit it - a routine practice, and anyone who stands against the war is labeled a pro-terrorist, killing all debate before it happens.

Teesri Duniya Theatre has never hesitated to shape a bold response to burning issues and events. Its focus on creating socially relevant plays with a sharp political edge predates September 11th and is reflected in its past productions including Jason Sherman's *Reading Hebron*, and my own plays *Counter Offence* and *Bhopal*.

Bhopal, which premiered in November 2001, deals with the Union Carbide plant explosion in Bhopal, India -a human tragedy that took place in 1984 and is still unfolding. So far, it has cost the lives of over 20,000 people. The play, written before the attacks on the World Trade Centre, is largely set in India and certainly deals with a different subject, but there is a point that connects the two: when suspected terrorists attacked the twin towers, the U.S. and its friends responded by bombing Afghanistan, yet when Union Carbide killed 20,000 Indians in Bhopal, nothing happen to its CEO, Warren Anderson, who is still alive and free in the U.S. The allied countries would never have even thought to bomb the U.S. for harbouring a proven killer, let alone ask the American president to hand him over to India for trial. Some would argue that Bin Laden and Anderson are incomparable, but doesn't such a position simply show America's nationalistic arrogance? Bin Laden has a price on his head, Anderson does not; Bin Laden is a terrorist, Bush is not; Saddam Hussein is outlawed, Ariel Sharon is not. To top it all off, Palestinian children with stones are terrorists, but Israeli soldiers with American weapons are merely keeping the peace! When eight American soldiers died in Afghanistan the headline in the *Globe and Mail* read "Worst Day of War", as if the days of killing countless Afghans and driving hundreds of thousands more into refugee camps were the better days of the war. Thus is reinforced the impression that an American life is worth more than a life in the Third World.

In an era of North American dominance of the global media, disinformation and selective news reporting, who is going to

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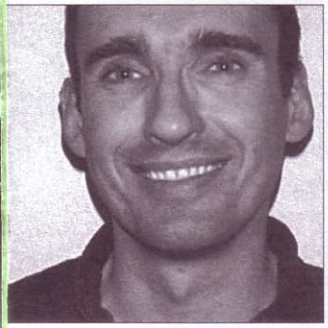
> For example, Mandela, Gandhi, and Allende were all once regarded as terrorists by the same powers that are, once again, deciding who is and who is not a terrorist

DANC with conviction:

An Interview with Aparna Sindhoor

by Ken McDonough



Through seamless choreography, combined with oral storytelling, song and music, Boston-based Kannada dancer Aparna Sindhoor contemporizes the dance form, depicting the heroic struggle of ordinary people at grips with oppression or provoking debate on current issues she cares deeply about. Her work Draupadi, for example, takes us from the ancient tale of Draupadi, the Mahabarata heroine who, lost in a bet by her husband, is miraculously redeemed by the god Krishna, to the modern story of Dopdi, a lower-caste woman who, raped and tortured by a village army unit, redeems herself on the strength of her own indomitable character.

Aparna presented Draupadi at the MAI in Montreal on September 29, 2001, shortly after the events of September 11th.

KM: Your work is socially and politically charged. What shaped your social and political sense?

AS: First, I would say, my parents. My mother started a feminist organization in India - the first feminist organization in my city - in the early 70's. When I was very little, she would take me to the meetings. There were many incidents of domestic violence. The women would come to the meetings to talk and there were doctors and lawyers there who would help them. I was there for every meeting. Although I didn't understand everything, my mother said that my sister and I should be exposed to things. She wanted us to be aware of what was going on and also to be compassionate. When I started to work as a dancer, those issues were what bothered me. I also experienced a lot of discrimination as a woman in India and later as a woman and a woman of colour in the U.S. Meanwhile, I was doing this art form that wasn't connecting with anything in my personal experience, so, while still in India, I started experimenting on a smaller level. I'd seen some women doing an abstract form of Bharatanatyam, but, even though I liked the choreography, I didn't really like it being so abstract. I wanted it to be something substantial, for the stories to be heard. So I decided that is what I wanted: to tell stories. Even if people are not aware of the social or political aspects, if it is a story, people will listen. As a dancer I have no problem with really abstract forms. I will watch and learn from the experience, but when I'm looking from the viewpoint of a person who has no inclination towards politics, then the movement becomes beautiful and the message gets lost. With a story, everyone listens, from children to older people.

KM: Tell me about the creative process and how you go into a character and develop somebody as intense as Draupadi.

AS: I first choreographed as if I were a storyteller, narrating the whole thing and then creating gestures and movements for the first three scenes. The first scene was very easy. I've done the Bharatanatyam Draupadi so many times that I just had to change the choreography for one scene. In the very last part, though, there is the rape scene. I focused more on the woman trying to escape, because she is attacked by surprise and suddenly they take her away and rape her. It is her running and them chasing her. Only in the very last bit is she actually on the floor and going through the torture. She was trying to escape, but that wasn't going to work because Draupadi knows what is

"Even if people are not aware of the social or political aspects, if it is a story, people will listen"

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Photos: Rich Fletcher

going to happen. Then I thought, maybe her rage is what is important. Even though she is repeatedly assaulted, each time makes her one degree braver and one degree stronger. She is being pushed down and she is growing in the opposite direction. I thought, maybe she is on the floor and her rage goes out and then comes back because she is humiliated and tortured and it is not always easy to grow at that level. So her coming up and then coming down is to show her oppression and then her rage. Even having her on the floor is not going to help: she is going to revolt. I read the script about a hundred times and then tried out different things and different music. Raju [Sivasankaran] and I worked hard on the last scene. We listened to a lot of drums. It was very clear that I wanted some kind of drum?

KM: What is your vision is for your ensemble and the overall role you see it playing in the arts.

AS: At the level of my group, choreographically and thematically I decide what we're going to do, but at the same time I respect the people who come into the company, their talent and what happens in their bodies? I don't dictate. I try to make compromises or I change my way of thinking. Or maybe we don't have to do one thing; maybe something else is there that the dancer does much more nicely, so maybe we should use that? I make a lot of changes in the rehearsal process and we workshop for many of the performances. I always want my dancers to know what they are getting into. I don't impose on them; I don't want them to just be bodies that I want to

> "Draupadi knows what is going to happen. Then I thought, maybe her rage is what is important"

use. If they don't believe in what is being done, they can say so and they don't have to do it. But I first want them to understand the theme and then decide. We have discussions and sometimes I bring in theatre people to talk about and get into the emotions of the piece. These things will also add a lot of value to the bodies of the performer. Then, if they're still not really convinced, they can say no.

What I'd like to do, now, though, are rehearsals that are not show-oriented, so we can explore more possibilities without worrying about performing. When I create a piece where I'm dancing alone, I practice a lot without thinking of any performance. I just explore all the different ways of doing things. I want my dancers to also develop this kind of experience. It shouldn't just be my thing: they should also be part of it.

At a general artistic level, I want people to think in new ways about what Bharatanatyam is. It shouldn't become like somebody's property. It should be shared more. My dream project is to leave a huge repertoire of even basic things. Because I am also a teacher, there's the big struggle over what to teach my stu-

dents, because they have to train rigorously in the form. I believe in very strong form and technique. I have to go back to my training. I have to do all these weak women and show all those things that I don't want to show, but those are the things I have in my repertoire. So what I want is to create a new repertoire using the same techniques. Very simple ones. There are different dances we do in training. I want, even for those dances, to have very simple messages of strong women and strong characters from the Dalat community or poor people being the heroes. I want those people to be part of the repertoire. I want to create a repertoire where, not just me, but many people, can take the songs and dances and teach them to their students. I realize that to do such a project I need a lot of money, time and help from a lot of people, but that is what I want to do.

I want young people to be more open to what I want to do. I mean, even creating the repertoire. I'm thinking the people who will welcome it enthusiastically will be the young people who are tired of doing something that has no meaning to their life. Maybe, at that level, they will be the ones who will make the connections better than the older generation...or maybe not even the older generation, maybe just people who think this is an art form that shouldn't be touched...because people have touched it and modified it and renamed it. Things have been happening throughout history, and if you don't remember that, you need some history lessons, I guess.

KM: You were mentioning the issues you were facing as an artist and as a woman of color. What do you find are the main issues?

AS: At a very superficial level, people are trying to be politically correct, but at a deeper level? Just last week, for example, after the World Trade Center incident, I was walking to my dance studio. This boy, who was maybe ten or eleven years old, was with his mom in their car. He stuck his head out and said: "Go home!" Imagine if young kids like that are brainwashed so quickly. I don't think it happened just in a week; it's been there since they were born and it comes out when there is tension in the air. As an artist, one time I showcased a work about Mumia Abu Jamal, a political prisoner that used a poem by a Costa Rican poet, Martín Espada. Even though it was a showcase for all artists, there were only two artists of colour and someone had to push to get the two of us into the show because nobody had thought about it. I felt I had a responsibility to do something that would at least represent some aspects of persons of colour and their struggle. I thought, what better than Mumia Abu Jamal? In the piece, I speak the poem. A lot of people spoke to me before the event, but after the show, most of the presenters - it was primarily a show for presenters - tried to avoid me. It was the first time I really felt discriminated against for what I did. If you want to ask me something or confront me, that is fine, but if you're avoiding me, then there's no discussion. I didn't get calls from anybody. I don't think it was about the choreography; I think it was more about the content. They were too scared to have me on stage?

> "after the World Trade Center incident, I was walking to my dance studio. This boy, who was maybe ten or eleven years old, was with his mom in their car. He stuck his head out and said: "Go home!"

Most people have accepted and liked what I've done. I'm sure they have questions, but that's good. You don't have to say it's all good. But then there are, as I was telling you, the presenters who just shut me off, which as a performer was a big drawback for me. I want to be going to places and performing because that's my profession. The struggle is not so much with the audience; it's more so with the people presenting. I want more people to want me, to have me in their company and in their forums.

KM: What do you perceive as being the divide between the presenters and your audience?

AS: As I understand it, resources are not distributed well enough? There are a few presenters, particularly in dance, who have a lot of resources and there are other people who have no money and who would want people to see different ways of doing things. But without money, it is difficult for artists to present. Basically, like everyone else, we have to take care of our survival. In the U.S. and in India there is not much funding for the arts. A few big presenters get all the funding and then they can dictate. I'm sure if they had a choice, people would like to see different things. There have been controversial discussions, but never have audience members said that they didn't want to see me? The presenters decide, "Oh, she's doing Bharatanatyam. People won't want to see it." But how do they know? Have they put me on stage to find out? Resources are tight, and so there will only be one kind of art coming all the time, which will only entertain and not do any questioning. If you do question, you have to have a big name, then whatever you do will fly.

KM: In the current circumstances, are you going to be trying to address some of the issues that are coming up now?

AS: One thing is the tragedy that happened (the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon) and the other is the backlash. When a nation can just say it's going to wage a war, what kind of statement is that? Is war the answer? Killing a few innocent people in Afghanistan is not going to help any nation or bring peace to the people who died in the World Trade Center. I think those people should be respected more; their death should not become the reason for a huge war. I don't think they deserve that kind of indecent treatment. Right now, though, it's still too fresh for me to think of any work coming out of it. For now, Raju wrote a few poems about anti-nuclearization with the message of peace in the end, so we may produce it along with a longer piece. ●

Ken McDonough is a Montreal-based translator, reviser and writer. He has been involved with Teesri Duniya Theatre as an actor, dramaturgist and editor for the past thirteen years and is a regular contributor to alt.theatre.

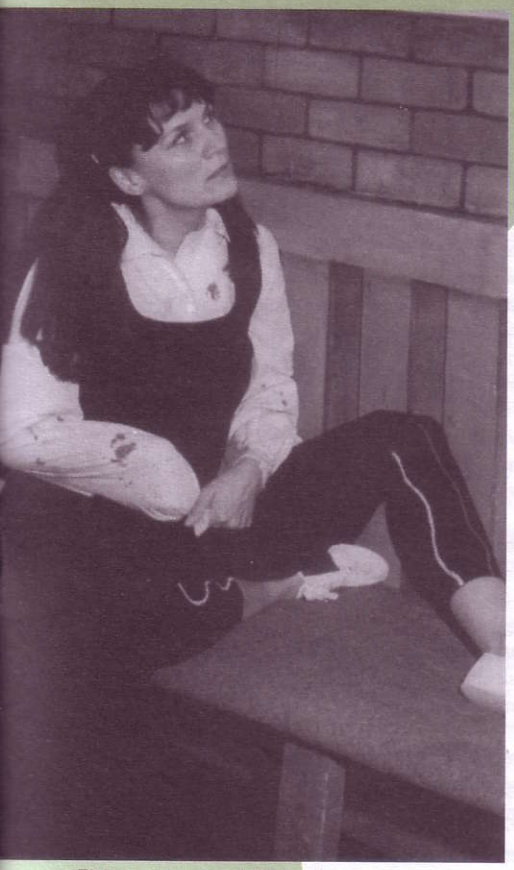
A Path With No Moccasins:

Embodiment as a Healing Process

by Shelley Scott

In September of 1999, Shirley Cheechoo gave two performances of *A Path With No Moccasins* at the University of Lethbridge. Cheechoo is a multi-talented Cree artist who expresses herself not only as an actress and playwright, but also as a painter, musician and singer, director and producer.

She is also the founder of Debajehmujig Theatre Group, a unique theatre company and training environment for Native artists located on the Wikwemikong Unceded Reserve on Manitoulin Island. It was here that *A Path With No Moccasins* premiered in 1991. I am intrigued by the healing function of embodiment in this solo performance piece. Taking on a role that may be termed autobiographical can be uniquely therapeutic, as well as aesthetically and thematically powerful; in this work by an aboriginal woman it is especially significant.



Photos courtesy of Blake Debassige

Métis writer Maria Campbell, among many others, has argued that the story-teller has an essential place in the healthy spiritual life of the community (Moses, "Write" 48). According to Native dramatist Jordan Wheeler, " At present the aboriginal community is healing, and stories that reflect the struggle, and the resulting harmonious existence with a given environment, help the healing process" (Wheeler 39). It is not surprising that healing storytelling should take place in the theatre. Tomson Highway argues that the Native "oral tradition translates most easily and effectively into a three dimensional medium. In a sense, it's like taking the 'stage' that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing it - using words, actors, lights, sound - onto the stage in a theatre" (Highway 421). Nor is it surprising that a number of Native works for theatre have taken the form of the autobiographical monologue or one-person show, since this particular form is so closely associated with issues of self-identity. Autobiographical and one-person shows have a strong tradition in Canadian theatre, and much of their power resides in the phenomenon of the actor-writer "playing" themselves. In performance, it is the artist's physical presence, their body, which becomes the signifier of authenticity and the site of lived experience. For women, especially, the experience of one's own body is often one of lack of control, alienation, and even loathing that can be further compounded with histories of abuse. To reclaim one's own body, to physically re-inhabit it in a public ceremony of sorts, can be both personally healing and artistically profound.

> "the aboriginal community is healing, and stories that reflect the struggle, and the resulting harmonious existence with a given environment, help the healing process."

In my opinion, the most intriguing aspect of *A Path With No Moccasins* is its autobiographical structure. As Cheechoo explains: "When I began my work I wanted

revenge on people for what they had done to me as a child. Once I had healed, I began to look for things in my culture that I could use to reflect reality" (qtd. in Clark 73). In the play's four sections, Cheechoo becomes herself at four periods in her life. We see Shirley at nine years old , when she is at residential school; we see her in her twenties, abusing alcohol in her searching for identity; finally, we see her at the age of thirty-five on Manitoulin Island, where she achieves a sense of healing closure. The play takes the form of a healing ritual in which, by embodying her own trauma and addiction, the actor emerges renewed and stronger after each performance. It is clearly autobiographical. In the dedication at the beginning of the published text, Cheechoo writes that she has "transformed [her] life into a 90 minute play, not knowing that it would be seen by so many people" (5).

The printed text is not an unbroken monologue, but indicates to whom the various speeches are directed - usually "To Us," or "To Herself." But often the indication is "Reliving," and significantly, at the end there are three speeches in a row that are labeled "She Connects":

> This is my body. No one is allowed to touch it unless I allow it. I have the choice to dance, to dance the dance of life. I hate those men for not dancing with me.
>
> The eyes of others are my mirrors. What I put out will come back to teach me.Is that why everybody was so angry around me because I was?
>
> Those sleeping children taking a path with no moccasins awake. I am one of them (46).

In his Introduction to the published text, Native Canadian actor Gary Farmer writes that "in reading it, we begin the process of healing for ourselves...I offer my thanks to the writer for her humble effort that all may see" (8). I would argue that by "seeing" the work performed, the message and hope of healing are made that much stronger. As effective as it may be to read about Cheechoo's painful experiences, to watch her become her earlier selves and live through her transformation is that much more powerful.

To insist on ignoring the body and denying its role in our cognition of reality is to contradict our experience; it amounts to a kind of sickness. For Daniel David Moses it is "...that alienation from yourself that the mainstream mindset creates. Up in your head you're separate from your animal self" (xvii). Director Michelle Newman writes: "when one is working with the body, with presence, incarnation, one is also working with absence incarnate. With the wounds, losses, traumas, memories, dreams, imaginings, desires, even the other bodies that this body incarnates. Of course, in the theatre, one regularly works with many of these categories of absence..." (Newman 21). Cheechoo's performance does just that: it is an act of mourning, an act of remembering physically, of making those absent (like Cheechoo's deceased father, like the child that Shirley Cheechoo once was, like all those displaced and lost in the process of colonial invasion) present again, but in the contained and sacred space of the theatre. Thus the wound is not denied, but it is not kept open in "real life" either. It can be honoured in this theatrical setting, and provoke in the audience a special kind of recognition, resulting in what Cixous calls "a sanctuary of recollection" (qtd. in Newman 21). The audience witnesses the performer discovering her truth through a kind of epistemology of the body.

"it is part of our jobs as Native artists to help people heal."

The best auto-performances are the ones that render the self as complex, and one might argue that such complexity is inevitable for the contemporary Native performer (Wilson 36). As Cherokee director Elizabeth Theobald observes: "To say the least, identity in a Native world with 500 different Nations and 500 years of oppression, acculturation, adoption, boarding schools, intermarriage, and forced migration can be very confusing. Our stories are unique, individual, and we wear the scars of our histories on our sometimes dreary day-to-day lives" (142). The very act of rendering this complexity visible can be empowering. As Daniel David Moses comments: "One of the words that always comes up in Native gatherings, and particularly among Native artists, is that it is part of our jobs as Native artists to help people heal..." (xxi). In Shirley Cheechoo's *A Path With No Moccasins,* the scars of history are worn on the body and made visible by a kind of storytelling that is a mixture of public testimonial and personal healing. To witness a performance is to share in that healing. ●

Biography

Shelley Scott is an assistant professor in the Department of Theatre and Dramatic Arts at the University of Lethbridge where she has been involved with bringing in Native playwrights Daniel David Moses, Tomson Highway, and Drew Hayden Taylor, as well as the dance company Daystar: Contemporary Dance Drama of Indian America.

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LEANING TOWERS & GOLDEN KEYS:

THE IRONDALE ENSEMBLE IN NOVA SCOTIA

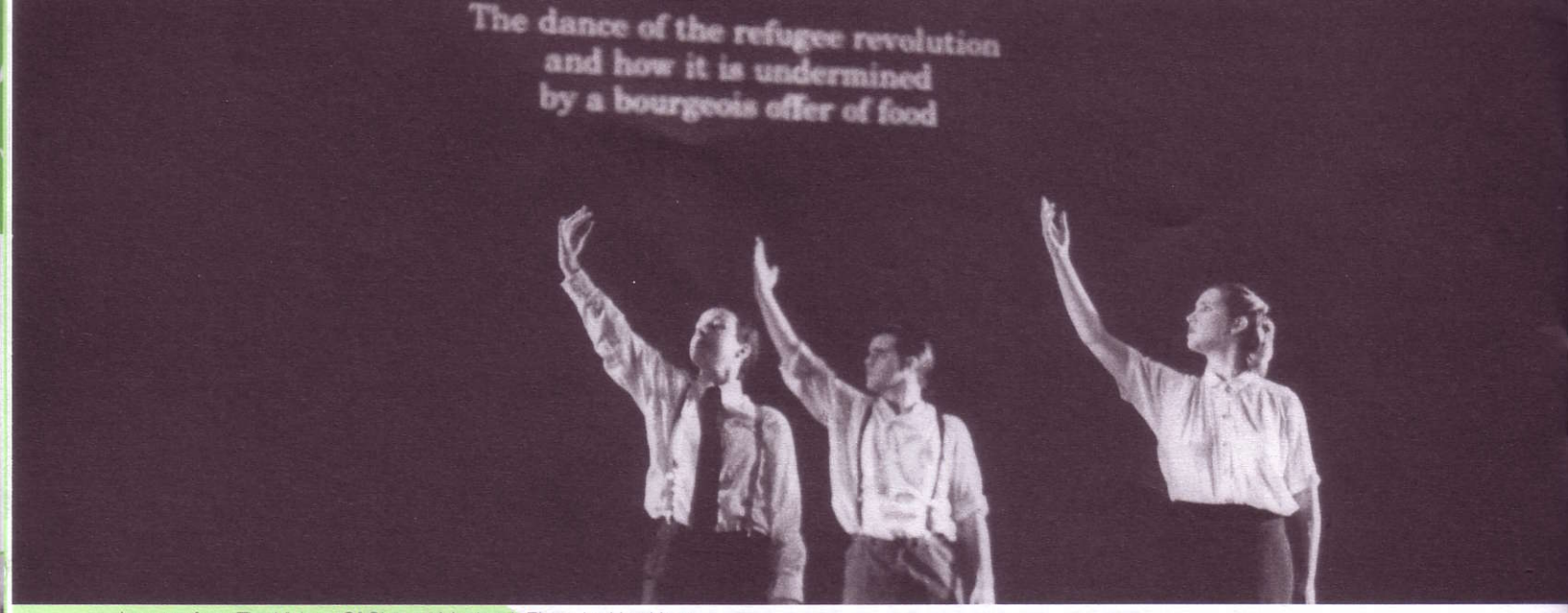
by Sue Leblanc-Crawford

On March 27, 2002, the Nova Scotia Minister of Tourism and Culture, Rodney MacDonald, announced to the province that the Nova Scotia Arts Council, the arm's length funding body for professional artists and arts organizations, had been dissolved, and its employees were asked to leave their offices. Sending shock waves through the province of Nova Scotia and the rest of Canada, the decision has left the Nova Scotian artists who relied on funding from the Arts Council uneasy and wondering what the model of arts funding will look like in the future. Despite assurances that applications to the new "Arts and Culture Council" will continue to be judged by a jury of peers based on artistic merit, many remain convinced that the government will revert back to its famed pork-barrelling: handing out grants to those it feels will do the most for the province.

But one member of the Nova Scotia theatre community who is not up in arms over the decision to disband the Nova Scotia Arts Council is Stephen Cross, the founder and artistic director of the Irondale Ensemble Canada. A twelve year old theatre company that works in many forms but always with the idea of social justice at the forefront, the Irondale Ensemble is no stranger to protesting injustices and objectionable government decisions; as Cross said in an interview in May of this year, "We've gone on lots of marches." But at the rally protesting the dissolving of the Arts Council, Irondale chose to absent itself. Cross had lost faith in the old Arts Council and felt it was ineffective. In 2001 Irondale was told by the Nova Scotia Arts Council that its operational funding (along with Playwrights' Atlantic Resource Centre, Gwen Noah Dance, and other organizations) was to be cut; from that point on the small theatre company would have to apply for funding on a project by project basis, making it much more difficult for Irondale to employ its ensemble year-round. One might suspect that Cross's apathy over the disbanding of the Council was the end result of sour grapes, but it seems his anger and disenchantment with government funding goes back much further. "Basically, my position on the Arts Council is: government is unable to adequately fund art, so it should get out of it," said Cross in a second interview in September.

Stephen Cross calls himself a "cultural popularist", which is in direct opposition to the executive director of the Nova Scotia Cultural Network, Andrew Terris, who refers to himself as a "cultural industrialist". (Terris and the Cultural Network were at the helm of the "Save the Arts Council Campaign" - a body that was in place even before the announcement of the dissolving of the Council came down). An article in the May 21, 1998 issue of *The Coast* (Halifax's free weekly newspaper) discusses Terris's involvement in a Statistics Canada study on the "cultural sector" in Nova Scotia. Following the study, Terris complained that the cultural industry was not given the weight (or the budget) it was due by the province: "From a job creation point of view, it's a fantastic investment," Terris says. "The bang for the buck is tremendous for government money. The arts are labour intensive, so investment goes straight to jobs not plants and equipment" (cited in Kyle Shaw, "The State of the Arts," *The Coast*, 21 May 1998). This type of argument troubles Cross. He is uncomfortable with the trend to include art in a list of "industries" and artists in a list of "resources" that have the potential to be exploited. In response to Terris' remarks, Steven Cross wrote a letter to the editor in the following week's issue of *The Coast*. He asserted his concern that in a province where "the government is led by corporate ethics" it is only a matter of time before an arts industry will collapse due to government industry policy; just as, for example, the fishing industry has collapsed in many communities in recent years. Cross believes that the Nova Scotia Arts Council was becoming increasingly bureaucratic, run in a manner that valued art and culture in much the same way that Terris speaks of it in *The Coast*: as an industry that should be protected. "Some things

Photos by Ken Kam



A scene from The Visions Of Simone Machard. Photo by Ken Kam

should not be bought and sold," says Cross, "and culture is one of them." His letter continued, referring specifically to impending privatization of (all) industry:

> These policies are with us because government is led by corporate ethics. Your words seem to suggest that by adopting these ethics the arts community will somehow begin a new era of government industrial development. An era of industrial development that is not injurious to humanity that the poor fishermen sadly missed out on. Well, history is against you. You cannot change these erroneous strategies and attitudes by adopting them, they can only be changed by challenging them.

Further on, Cross attacks the industrialization of culture as it is manifested in the trend of corporate funding for the arts. Some obvious examples of corporate funding in Halifax are the du Maurier Jazz Festival, Neptune Theatre's studio space - the du Maurier Theatre, and the Ford Canada theatre school at Neptune. Cross argues that once a corporation is responsible for the budget of an arts organization, then that organization becomes responsible to the corporation and loses its ability to speak. His letter continues, "To spend money on the arts in the way that you advocate will speed up the 'corporatization' of culture, and spell death for humanity in the arts the same way it has spelled death for humanity in any industry corporate Canada has controlled."

How then has Stephen Cross challenged the existing government strategies toward the "cultural industry"? For the most part he has done so through the Irondale Ensemble's dedication to the popularization of theatre in communities throughout Halifax and Nova Scotia.

The Irondale Ensemble Project (Canada) was formed in 1990 when Cross returned to Halifax from New York City where he worked with the Irondale Ensemble Project (New York) - founded in 1983 - for four years as an actor. While working with Irondale NY, Cross became aware of ways to think about and do theatre that he had not been aware of in theatre school or while in the middle of the "business" in New York. He realized the impact theatre could have on people socially, and how - following theatre practitioners like Augusto Boal and Viola Spolin - it could become a tool to promote education, to encourage free thinking ("outside the box"), and to mobilize people to work toward social justice and change.

In Halifax Irondale has a mandate which includes producing original theatre works that "challenge existing theatrical norms and promote the integration of theatre arts into educational programs and community development initiatives." The facet of the mandate that is perhaps most important - and indeed what feeds the other two parts - is Irondale's commitment to "popularizing theatre and making it more accessible to more Nova Scotians, both as participants and as audience members."

Using a variety of techniques and theatrical forms, Irondale has helped numerous marginalized groups find and legitimate their voices to speak out about their lives and their particular issues or problems. Giving "ordinary people" - those who are not necessarily artists or spokespersons and who are very often middle to low income individuals - a chance to participate in an exercise that allows them to express their views clearly and without fear hearkens back to the work of one of Irondale's strongest influences, Augusto Boal.

"Popular Theatre", that is, theatre for the people and by the people, has its roots in ancient community ritual. Augusto Boal argues that with the introduction of an aristocracy, and later a bourgeois class, theatre developed into a specialized form in which there were active participants (the actors) and passive viewers (the audience). Boal's response to this marginalization of the people's participation in theatre, and therefore in any decision-making process, is most concisely found in his *Poetics of the Oppressed*, which grew out of his work with the *Operación Alfabetización Intergral* - a national literacy campaign in Peru in 1973. Boal writes that the main purpose of Theatre of the Oppressed is to "change the people - 'spectators' passive beings in the theatrical phenomenon - into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action." And there is a reason for this

> It is the notion that the people themselves should and can be active in changing their situations in society that Irondale attempts to convey both to its audience and its members

desired change: to allow the people to contribute to their future and to plans and actions for their well being. Within the Theatre of the Oppressed, a person "trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps theatre is not revolutionary itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution."

It is the notion that the people themselves should and can be active in changing their situations in society that Irondale attempts to convey both to its audience and its members. In the company's twelve-year history, its members (who generally work as an ensemble for at least one year, and often longer) have collectively created over twenty original productions. Often these shows are influenced by or are adaptations of classical works, including plays from ancient Greece: the company's most recent public performance was an adaptation of Aristophanes's *The Frogs*, which explicitly yet creatively expressed anti-war sentiments. *A Loosely Veiled Allegory: The Harry Ferguson Story* was originally presented as part of the People's Summit in June of 1995 (offered as an alternative to and running concurrently with the Halifax G7 Economic Summit). The play was later reworked and, with a different cast, was presented in October, 2001. Featuring actors portraying CBC radio drama actors in the 1950's, the play tells the story of a fictional "Harry Ferguson", a CBC radio personality and local hero to rural Nova Scotians who gets pushed around, and eventually out of his job, in the wake of the budget-cutting reforms at the CBC. Well-performed and cleverly staged, the play brought to life the threat of marginalization of small communities in the face of money-saving, corporate values, and the impending stultification of the CBC.

In 1993, Irondale created *The Leaning Tower, The Golden Key*. A play about the downturn in the fishery in Nova Scotia, it was to be Irondale's first experiment with what the company later named *Study Club Theatre*. The notion of the study club came from the practice of Father Moses Coady - a priest, teacher, and social activist in Nova Scotia in the 1920s. Coady, the leader of the Antigonish Movement, believed that the great tower of capitalism was leaning and about to fall to the ground (hence the name of the Irondale play), and preached that a new tower of co-operative economics could be built in its place. Coady worked in rural communities, helping workers and their families better their situations by asking the question, "What do we have to do, what do we have to learn, to get ourselves out of the difficulty we are in?"

"Irondale's presence here is helping to boost the students' self esteem - they're starting to own the idea of being creators. It's important for students to realize they have a say in their environment,"

Following Coady's example, the Irondale Ensemble went to Sheet Harbour - a small community on the province's eastern shore. The company lived in the community, researched the impact of the downturn in the fishery on the community, and created *The Leaning Tower, The Golden Key*. When the play was ready, residents of Sheet Harbour were asked to come and watch a performance. Following the show, the audience broke into "Study Club Groups" - the same way Moses Coady grouped his people to discuss issues and ideas - and, through popular theatre techniques, responded to the issues of the play and began to work out ideas for solving them. Irondale continued leading about forty people in the community in the study club groups over an extended period of time, and the result of the work was a new play, *The Mystery of the Eastern Shore*, created by the participants.This play was then shown to fishing communities across the province.

Another vital part of Irondale's commitment to popular theatre, and indeed to the community, in Nova Scotia is the ensemble's strong presence at St. Patrick's Alexandra School in Halifax's north end. For the last three years, the company has been in residence at the school (which runs from grade primary to grade nine), and it works in various ways with the students, eighty per cent of whom are African Nova Scotian. Some members of the ensemble work in the classrooms, leading students in theatre games that hone listening skills, original thinking, and focus. Irondale also leads the students in role-playing activities that deal with pertinent issues such as bullying, teenage pregnancy, and racism - all very real concerns for young people in a low income area - and very often the focus of the exercises reflect what the students learn from their teachers in a given week. Irondale also selects a small group of students each year to participate in its Performance Program, where students from different classes who demonstrate a strong interest in theatre work together after school to create their own original performance pieces. Tom Henderson, a teacher at the junior high level at St. Patrick's Alexandra, is one of many teachers who is a strong supporter of Irondale's presence at his school. Henderson believes that the work the ensemble does with his students is invaluable, and would like it if the company could do more. He wishes that Irondale's influence on his students could swamp all the negative influences they are faced with. "Irondale's presence here is helping to boost the students' self esteem - they're starting to own the idea of being creators. It's important for students to realize they have a say in their environment," says Henderson.

At St. Patrick's Alexandra, Irondale was also heavily involved with *The Umoja Project*, which concluded in June, 2002. Based on the principle of an Akan proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child", *The Umoja Project* was a co-operative effort of the local community, other artists from that community, and the students themselves to create a theatrical production (incorporating acting, dance, music, script-development, and costume creation) centred around the past, present, and future of those students. The production had a strong focus on the students' histories, bringing together the culture of both pre-colonial Africa and the more recent history and culture of African Nova Scotians. Pertinent to the Irondale Ensemble's mandate, *The Umoja Project* was one that "drawing upon the skills and talents of community members, gives a voice to the personal and collective histories of the community, while suggesting a direction for the future."(from press material)

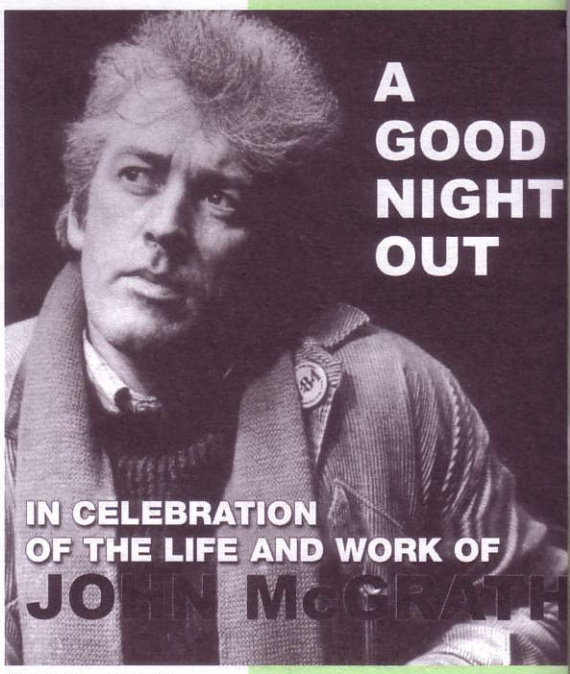
Towers Con't to page 15

"Plugged into History:"

Celebrating the Work of John McGrath

O by Maria DiCenzo

Maria DiCenzo teaches in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her earlier work on John McGrath and 7:84 Scotland includes *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968-1990* (Cambridge UP 1996).



Conference Poster

When David Bradby and Susanna Capon first started to plan an event to celebrate the work of John McGrath two years ago, it was with the expectation of his involvement and participation. McGrath's untimely death in January of 2002 changed all that. The conference entitled "Plugged into History" took place at Royal Holloway University of London on April 19-20, but it was marked by the sadness felt by many who had worked with McGrath at different points and in various capacities throughout his career.

The conference was an attempt to bring academics and practitioners together to discuss McGrath's work–his writing, directing, and producing--for television, stage, and cinema over the last forty years. It was striking to note the sheer quantity and range of his creative output and formal experimentation. In the theatre world he is best remembered for his work with both the English and Scottish 7:84 Theatre companies, and the landmark play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. But speakers also stressed the importance of earlier plays at the Liverpool Everyman, as well as the large and small scale shows he produced in Scotland throughout the 1990s.

In addition to playwriting, McGrath was actively involved in television and the film industry for many years. His film company, Freeway Films, founded in 1982, produced pieces ranging from adaptations of his Highlands shows to feature films like *The Dressmaker*, *Carrington*, and *Ma Vie en Rose*. Participants had the opportunity to screen and discuss examples of his early work for film and television (*Bofors Gun, The Reckoning, Z Cars*), some of which McGrath had selected for the conference before his death.

Given the range of contexts explored, one of the recurrent motifs to emerge in papers and discussions at the conference was the concept of 'borders.' McGrath was writing and producing across borders of many kinds: nation, class, gender, media, the artistic community/academe. Borders can be disrupted, crossed, even moved, but they are by their nature patrolled. McGrath was conscious of the significance of borders and in his essay "Theatre and Democracy" he writes:

First of all, a democracy needs Borders: a demos or community seeking to run itself on democratic lines draws a boundary, and almost all those within are citizens with rights and responsibilities. Those excluded are non-citizens....The boundaries, limits, to the demos are used to defend the demos from tyranny from without, and to define the limits of the population....Who is included, who is excluded, is a site of contestation, now as it was in Ancient Greece....Of course the voices of the excluded have to be heard, and the values of the included celebrated, upheld, and scrutinised. The borders of democracy, especially the internal, have to be constantly contested. (231-32)

> "There was a general sense that McGrath's work should and needs to be more widely recognized and included as part of university curricula."

McGrath's own border incursions are both a mark of his achievement, as well as a source for debate. While the need to pay tribute made it understandably difficult to interrogate his artistic practices, I had hoped that the academic setting of the conference would encourage participants to engage in a critical reflection on the borders that we establish and patrol as theatre critics and teachers. In the papers, the points of contention arose most frequently in relation to scholarly attempts to situate his work, whether this was in particular genres, media, or national literatures. There was a general sense that McGrath's work should and needs to be more widely recognized and included as part of university curricula, but the conference did not generate any concrete solutions to address the continued marginalization of this kind of work.

This overview of his career in various media only served to highlight that his most significant contributions and virtually all his published writing (including scripts, critical articles, and books) were devoted to the theatre, and specifically to a politically engaged popular theatre. His two polemical works, *A Good Night Out* (1981) and *The Bone Won't Break* (1990), are now joined by a final collection of essays published by Nick Hern Books in time for the conference, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About: Reflections on Theatre*, which he describes as being about

"theatre, my first love and discipline" (xi). The book offers a selection of short articles and reflections (some previously unpublished) from 1959-1999. What editor Nadine Holdsworth stresses is the way the collection is held together by "McGrath's resolute faith in theatre's ability to contribute to humanity through its engagement with people, places and political processes" (xxii).

His contribution to the debates surrounding political theatre, and his determination to sustain them, cannot be overestimated. It is telling that in her tribute article to McGrath, Joyce McMillan recounts chairing a discussion on political theatre in the 21st century at the Edinburgh Festival the previous year: "As I noted how few speakers seemed able to discuss the subject without referring back to John McGrath and 7:84, the door swung open and the man himself appeared, ill but vibrant, to make one of the angriest and most lucid contributions to the debate, reminding us that the circumstances in which theatre is made tend to dictate its meaning" (*The Scotsman*, Jan 24, 2002). McGrath's outspokenness alienated some, but he never lost the courage of his convictions about the critical and challenging function theatre could play in society.

One of the final sessions of the conference featured a range of artists with whom McGrath had collaborated over the years in various media, including Elizabeth MacLennan, designer Jenny Tiramani, actors Bill Paterson and John Bett, and writers Troy Kennedy Martin and Christopher Hampton. The anecdotes, some moving, some extremely funny, offered glimpses into McGrath's tendencies to push boundaries, to be resourceful, but most importantly to realize his own artistic ideas while providing the means and creating the possibilities for his collaborators to realize theirs. Hampton described him as having the recklessness of the artist, with the calm required to drive the recklessness through. These qualities were reflected in his attempts to facilitate the work of young artists both through community-based theatre projects in Scotland and through the founding of the film lab "Moonstone" (an offshoot of Robert Redford's Sundance Festival). The personal accounts and the work itself attest to John McGrath's immense creative talent, his unflagging political commitment, and his warmth and generosity as a human being. He will be missed by many. ●

Voices Con't from page 5

look behind the events of September 11th at the many and larger crises and issues woven into the fabric of American history itself? I believe that theatre is well equipped for the task. It is a particularly important vehicle for dramatizing history, by which I do not mean narrating it, for dramatization involves extracting as much of the truth as possible from a situation while still telling a good story. In theatre, the spectators are necessarily gathered in one place, at one time, which means the social aspect is a focal point of the work. Also, given the media's abdication of its responsibility to investigate and critically analyze world events, theatre must be adapted to emphasize and explore alternative ways of communicating - and connecting with, our communities.

That is what Teesri Duniya sought to do with its Options For Action program. Designed by Ted Little to run alongside *Bhopal*, Options for Action was a series of ancillary activities that provided ticket-buying public spectators with options to become active participants in the issues raised by the play. At the same time, it sought to nurture an appreciation of theatre as a viable art form. It was not simply an alternative program of events: by engaging the audience's minds and participation rather than just their pocketbooks, each event added weight and tangible value to the theatre-going experience.

Our experience with programming like Options For Action, and with the plays we have produced, has shown not only that issues affecting and reflecting our diverse communities and world can be dealt with in depth, but also that people, typically treated as passive spectators out to forget their worries, respond enthusiastically to, and appreciate opportunities to more actively participate!

In conclusion, I would like to return to the questions with which I began. The U.S. has already declared that the war will be a long one and will involve many nations. Some are calling it the beginning of a third world war. I hope not. I pray not. However, it already is a war against the Third World and its Diaspora in the First World. If Canada wants multiculturalism to be meaningful, it has to take up the cause of peace and reject war.

Artists and Art organizations, meanwhile, must ask themselves a very serious question: Must the arts become more proactive, drawing on and communicating the experiences of the communities with which we share the world, or simply be there to entertain? Theatre, as Sartre said, is the most political of the arts. At Teesri Duniya, we believe that theatre must respond to crises and historical events without reservation and with a political conscience. I invite other writers and theatres to share their approaches. ●

Rahul Varma is a Montreal-based playwright and founding artistic director of Teesri Duniya Theatre

Towers Con't from page 13

Like most small theatre companies, the Irondale Ensemble struggles to keep its head above water most of the time. At times it has been difficult to pay a living wage to the members of the ensemble, and this results in the challenge of keeping the same acting company together for more than a couple of seasons. But unlike most small companies, Irondale has managed to stay together - and produce plays and run community programs quite prolifically - for twelve years. The key, it seems, lies in the dedication of the ensemble, and their leader, to the company's mandate of popularizing theatre and bringing a message of justice and empowerment to the people. Giving marginalized individuals and communities the confidence to use their right to speak out is a vital and (in the context of the present capitalist system), largely unpopular role to undertake. ●

Susan Leblanc-Crawford is a core performer with, and General Manager of the Zuppa Circus Theatre Company in Halifax NS. She holds a BA (Hons) in Theatre (Acting) for Dalhousie University, and she has performed with various companies in the Maritimes including Two Planks and a Passion, Mermaid Theatre, the Atlantic Theatre Festival, and Live Bait Theatre. Susan has also taught acting and performance in the Theatre Department at Dalhousie.

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