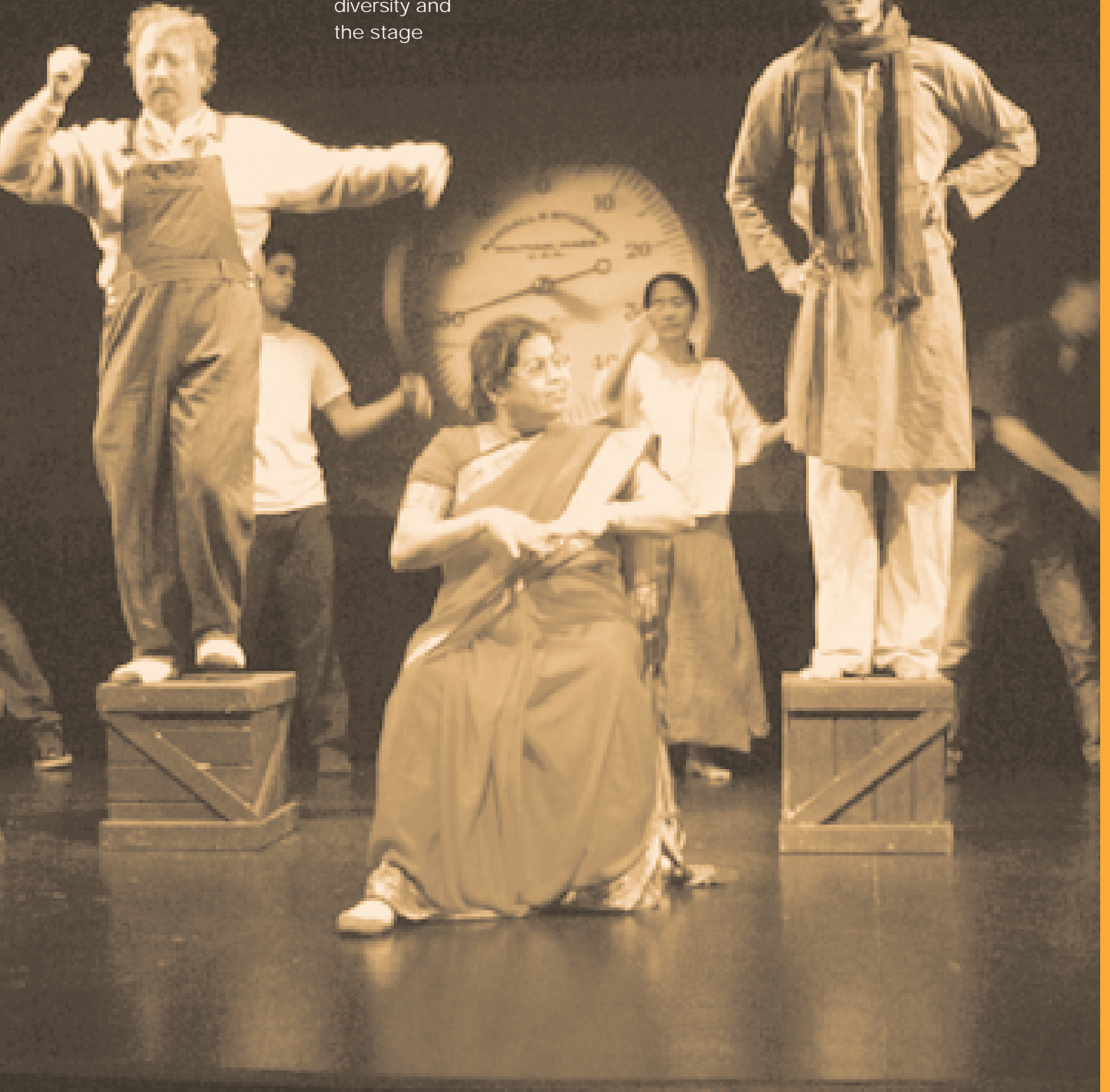




vol.3, no.1 April 2004

theatre

cultural
diversity and
the stage



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EDITORIAL

by Edward Little

Political Theatre/Populist Theatre



The next several issues will feature a series of articles on the current state of political theatre in Canada — how it is defined and created; its objectives; and its necessity, efficacy, and artistry from the often polarized perspectives of margins and mainstream. For postmodernists, all theatre, insofar as it supports a particular world view, is political. Yet the designation “political” is too-often applied in a derogatory sense to work that is overtly critical of governments, policies, or beliefs, or that challenges the world view of the critic.

As this issue goes to press, *The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* has just completed its cross-Canada tour in Montreal. Created and performed by Camyar Chai, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Marcus Youseff and co-starring Tom Butler, *Ali and Ali* offers a brutally satirical look at Bush’s War on Terror. Reception of the piece was mostly positive and occasionally dismissive. From a political perspective, many of those who failed to take the show seriously — to engage in critical analysis of the play on its own terms rather than dismissing it with a reductive “but it’s not real theatre” — espoused the kind of binary analysis characterized by the irrational nationalist rhetoric of Bush’s “you are either with us or against us.”

The contradictions of *Ali and Ali* are mirrored in the play’s merciless satire: no sacred cows, goats, or American consumer goods are spared. An essential premise of the show has Ali and Ali marketing their stories to the audience for financial gain. For me, it was hard not to like the two Ali clowns — they are at once products of a contemporary multi-ethnic reality and tragically flawed. They incisively recount the oppression they face as “liberated” Agrabanian citizens (wonderful country — two kilometers from sea to oily sea), all the while manifesting a deeply ironic lack of self-awareness as they pursue their capitalist dreams with tireless optimism and systematically exploit “the big white guy” hired to play multiple roles as the Oppressor. The play rejects any essentially binary sense of them versus us because — on multiple levels and from multiple cultural perspectives — Ali and Ali are both them and us.

Ali and Ali embrace the essential contradictions of contemporary theatre in a postmodern world, where politics are ubiquitous and the need to examine complicity is essential. Popular culture must first represent the hegemonic forces that it wants to resist. From the perspective of cultural diversity, such representations are essential in order to challenge reductive depictions of universal Otherness that — by reinforcing singular master narratives — deny culturally inflected counter-narratives. Theatrical affirmations of social injustice — especially when the reality of such injustices contradicts the more positive aspirations of Canadian cultural policy — must be considered as necessary (albeit politically charged) steps towards social intervention in the interests of multicultural representation.

The theatre that emerges out of the desire to represent counter-narratives through which to better understand marginalized subjectivities must not suffer from a critical failure to fully engage with both aesthetic and socio-cultural difference. The history of political theatre in Canada is in large part a history of engagement with the concerns of contemporary multiculturalism. The Finnish and Ukrainian theatres that sprang up in reaction to the Russian Revolution largely debated the role of the immigrant in terms of Canadian nationalism. The Workers’ Theatre of the 1930s agitated for a vision of social justice irrespective of gender and ethnicity. And George Luscombe’s Toronto Workshop Productions tackled international and American politics. The drive towards a distinctly Canadian (non-foreign, and especially non-British) expression of socially engaged theatre distinguished the collectively created documentary dramas and the Alternate Theatre of the 1970s.

Much of our socially engaged, political, and especially participatory forms such as community-based or popular theatre continues to be about an ongoing project of decolonization. None of the writers in this issue deal with an overtly political theatre, yet the kinds of social justice issues that continue to restrict many of Canada’s culturally diverse theatre artists — accessibility, self-representation, discrimination on non-artistic grounds and the associated failure to recognize aesthetic and social difference — are implicit. Shelley Scott writes of the pronounced presence of Asian-Canadian artists at the Edmonton Fringe. She notes the prevalence of themes pertaining to generational tension in their work and her sense that these are plays created largely to push at a white audience. Misty Cozak writes of her personal struggle as a Japanese-Canadian artist to come to terms with the political implications of a traditional Japanese approach to stoic silence. Christopher Grignard writes of Marie Clements’s re-authoring of Aboriginal identity within the prejudicial socio-economic contexts of urban geography and racist memory. David Fancy raises questions about the limits of intercultural community-based theatre to strike a balance between the need for local affirmation and a larger socio-cultural need for intervention addressing systemic injustice.

Discussion about these issues is timely. From June 3 to 6 in Victoriaville, Quebec’s Theatre Parminou will be hosting Rencontres Internationales de Théâtre d’Intervention (RITI), a series of international meetings on popular theatre. The meetings will be conducted in English and French and will provide an opportunity for practitioners and other interested individuals to explore these and other questions.

In today’s climate, drawing generic lines is in itself a political act. It may be legitimately done to establish appropriate criteria in order to evaluate artistic merit and the integration of artistic and social goals. When such lines are drawn without a concomitant critical framework, however, the act must be suspect.





Cultural Diversity

at the Edmonton Fringe Festival

by Shelley Scott

The year 2003 marked the twenty-second annual Edmonton International Fringe Theatre Festival. Dubbed “Attack of the Killer Fringe,” the Festival this year presented more than 140 different theatre companies on twelve indoor stages, two outdoor stages, and twelve Bring Your Own Venues (independent spaces arranged by artists themselves). A section of Edmonton’s Old Strathcona neighbourhood is blocked off from traffic and becomes a giant carnival site, with buskers and vendors of all kinds. At the heart of the space are the TransAlta Arts Barns, newly renovated this year and housing the new office spaces of Fringe Theatre Adventures, the company that produces the annual Festival with corporate assistance and many volunteers.

The Edmonton Fringe is billed as the largest of its kind in North America, although Fringes in Minnesota and Winnipeg are also in the running. With eight hundred performers appearing onstage in Edmonton, (according to the press package), I was curious to see what kind of self-identified cultural diversity might be represented at the 2003 Edmonton Fringe. About 70,000 tickets are sold to the indoor shows and half a million people attend the Festival site (Matwychuk 12), so it is a significant cultural and economic phenomenon. Who appears onstage and whose stories are told are important questions. Fringe organizers emphasize that the Festival is unjuried and uncensored, with acceptance determined by a lottery system, but they also stress that it is “dedicated to the creation of theatre that challenges and celebrates the cultural fabric of our communities” (*Fringe Program 5*). One might therefore hope to see a representative cross-section of North America’s theatre-making population.

Certainly, I saw a number of shows at the 2003 Fringe that were identified as originating from a particular ethnic perspective or were intended to provide audiences with a glimpse of diverse cultural issues. For example, *Shylock* was written by Mark Leiren-Young, performed by John D. Huston, and directed by John Juliani. This complex and intelligent show featured Huston, who is Metis, playing a Jewish actor who is forced to defend his portrayal of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* against charges of anti-Semitism. Another example was *The Making of Warriors*, Sharon Pollock’s powerful exploration of the links between racism and sexism, originally written as a radio play in 1991 and adapted for the

stage in 2000. Directed by Heather Inglis, *The Making of Warriors* tells the stories of two women: Sarah Moore Grimke, a nineteenth-century American who campaigned for the abolition of slavery and for women’s suffrage, and twentieth-century Native Canadian Annie Mae Aquash, murdered because of her involvement with the American Indian Movement.

A Man, A Magic, A Music was a one-man autobiographical show by 58-year-old African-American entertainer Melvin Brown. This distinctly old-fashioned variety act, featuring jokes, tap dancing, storytelling, and much singing, evoked a feeling of vaudeville entertainment; yet Brown did not shy away from discussing the racism he has encountered throughout his life, nor the double standards of the music industry in rewarding black and white artists. Finally, *Aotearoa*, performed by Irene Astle with masks designed and created by Terri Diane, presented a series of Maori stories that explain the creation of New Zealand, or *Aotearoa*, “Land of the Long White Cloud” (Program).

But if I were to generalize, I might suggest that Asian-Canadians are the identifiable ethnic minority community with the strongest presence at Edmonton Fringes, past and present. The most notable example is Edmontonian Marty Chan, who has had a series of plays at the Fringe over the years. Interestingly, Chan has written that none of the scripts he produced at the Fringe “had anything to do with my Asian background, because I wanted to avoid being stereotyped as the Chinese-hyphen-Canadian writer” (Chan 14). For Chan, the Fringe has been an opportunity to develop as a writer and to attract attention from artistic directors, critics, and the public, rather than a venue to talk about his own experiences growing up Chinese-Canadian in rural Alberta. But Chan’s best-known works, in fact, have been the ones that directly address his ethnicity: *Mom, Dad, Im Living with a White Girl* went on to be produced across Canada and published three times, and the television pilot *The Orange Seed Myth and Other Lies Mothers Tell* won two media awards (Nothof 7).

More recently, theatre makers of Asian origin have been using the Edmonton Fringe in a manner which incorporates their ethnicity much more explicitly. Yung Luu, who was born in Vietnam, wrote, directed, and acted in a trilogy of plays at the Edmonton

Asian-Canadians
are the identifiable
ethnic minority
community with
the strongest
presence at
Edmonton Fringes,
past and present.



Opposite Page: *The Yellow Perils* Kevin Cheung(left) and Kightzeareau Anora Logrono. Left: Byron Yee in *Paper Son*, photo Ed Kreiger. Below: Writer Nancy Ng Right: Byron Yee in *Paper Son*, photo Dan Dion.



Fringe and received Sterling Award nominations for these works. *Chinese Food* and *Model Minority* were followed by *I Chink* in 1999, a play that has since been published in *Canadian Theatre Review*.

In the 2003 Edmonton Fringe, Nancy Ng and Byron Yee each produced plays that took on very similar issues, Ng's from a Chinese-Canadian and Yee's from a Chinese-American perspective. Ng wrote and produced a short piece entitled *The Yellow Peril*, directed by Kevin Cheung and featuring Cheung and Kightzeareau Anora Logrono. The play depicts the struggles of early Chinese immigrants in British Columbia in the 1880s. By interspersing the

1955 stories of a grandfather, Yim, and his grandson with scenes of Yim and his best friend Fu Qua in 1887, Nancy Ng managed to convey not only historical information but also a sense of the heartbreaking suffering of early immigrants. Exploited through the poorly paid and dangerous work of building the railway, the characters of Yim and Fu Qua represent the aspirations and bravery of these early immigrants, as well as their sense of helplessness and betrayal by the Canadian government. The play ends with an impassioned speech by the character of Yim's grandson, demanding an apology for what his grandfather's generation endured. Interestingly, *The Yellow Peril* was the only one of the plays listed in the Fringe Program to cite "education" as one of its aims.

Paper Son, written and performed by Byron Yee and directed by Glen Chin, also tackled the experiences of early Chinese immigrants. His own father was a mystery to Yee, and his one-man autobiographical show recounts how it was only as an adult, struggling to make a living as an actor and stand-up comic in San Francisco and Los Angeles, that he began investigating his own sense of what it means to be Chinese. That search led him to a discovery: the Chinese people of his father's generation had been imprisoned for periods ranging from a week to two years on Angel Island, the Chinese equivalent of Ellis Island. Yee's considerable skills as a performer made this ninety-minute show both educational and highly entertaining, a combination which accounts both for its success back in the 1998 Fringe when it first premiered and for its subsequent American runs. *Paper Son* will be produced in Los Angeles in September 2003, and Yee's hopes for its success are made more urgent by his depiction of the alternative: failure in his own show will mean a return to playing degrading stereotypes of Asians in

Hollywood movies. Both Ng and Yee made use of poetry written by the early Chinese immigrants, and these short, poignant recitations also brought a deeper level to both of their plays.

I found it significant that in both *The Yellow Peril* and *Paper Son* a young man complains that he does not want to be Chinese, yet later goes on to take pride in his heritage once he learns more about it. This was also the theme of another one-man show at the 2003 Fringe, Jason Neufeld's *Confessions of a Repressed Mennonite*, although here the cry was, "I didn't want to be Mennonite!" In Neufeld's case, he found himself investigating how growing up as a

Mennonite in southern Manitoba affected his development and identity. Instead of poetry, Neufeld employed rock song lyrics and video footage on an onstage television set, alluding to the role of popular media in regulating "normality" for young viewers.

A common thread throughout the Fringe shows I saw, especially these last three, is the painful phenomenon of young people across racial and religious lines rejecting their place in a perceived "minority" and wishing to be part of some imagined Canadian cultural mainstream. For these artists, theatre became a place to come to terms with and celebrate their heritage. It is encouraging that theatre artists are making use of popular theatre events like the Edmonton Fringe to explore their own identity and share it with a wide audience. ●

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For these artists, theatre became a place to come to terms with and celebrate their heritage.

Shelley Scott is an associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Dramatic Arts at the University of Lethbridge. She is also a member of the editorial board of *alt.theatre*.

festival of imp

Poem by Suleikha Ali Yusuf

This letter is to inform you of my resignation from your organization. It has become unbearable for me, physically and spiritually, to participate in a feast whose main course is my own body and soul.

you claim to give back
what you stole from my womb
with your
festival of imperialism
celebrating the ownership of Africa
and the selling of my children
to purge
constipated bowels
of cannibalistic consumers
refusing to awaken
from self-induced confusion
and delighting in tasty morsels
of stolen cultures

sacrilege of our spirits
in the name of solidarity, community
Art and fraternity

hypocrisy and greed

i cannot endure this pain
of working for slave masters
and prostitution of African cultures

for a few hundred dollars a month
i participate in slow murder
my hands are soaking red
with the blood of my sisters and brothers
i cannot bear the accusing finger
of my ancestor mothers and fathers

but
the rent has to be paid
mouths have to be fed
and my son needs a toy

i am the latest acquisition
in a zoo of exotica
to justify the millions
that flow into vue de babel

colonizer and colonized
working together
in a happy little family

where everyone speaks the same language
and wears the same plastic smile

in the name of Development
we hire authentic natives
and create suitable stories
to put more money into our pockets
we create new languages
to suite our new faces
we will let them believe
that together
we will all be stronger

we cannot let them discover
this time there will be no rebirth
with the conquest of the final frontier

we do not want their diamonds
we do not want to save their souls
we do not wish to conquer their lands
we do not want to own their labour
we will no longer bury their history
in passages of untruth and confusion
we do not wish to interfere
with their fights for liberation

this time
we will help them do their work
and advance their condition
with all sincerity
we will wear their skin
and believe their superstition
sacrificing our ego at the alters of their gods
we will work their cause
we will not be at peace
until
we become their true reincarnation
we will not rest
until
we become them

to hide the truth of our motives
we will play games
in a new world order
of virtual realities
and bloodless deaths

erialism

techno wars
and body-snatchers
blatant lies
and sophisticated weapons
cordless strangulation
endless death
whimpers without an echo

language
is an instrument of control and
creates a world in which we participate willingly

The colonizer within,
rivalry to please the master,
killing the sister and brother
on the road
to the master's heart

rents have to be paid
mouths have to be fed
and my son needs a toy

Oh my African prince!
refuse to bow
to the new colonizers
even if it is to die of hunger
it is much worse to eat your own flesh

it is time
to get physical and connect to soulbeing
it is time to live again in my body
before it is occupied forever by shadowy figures
it is time to stop the mad thoughts
that circulate in smoke and land on nothing
it is time to stop thinking
it is time to stop thinking of thinking
in the footsteps of false map-makers
following the false trails set in
capitalist jungles

it is time to gather my scattered bits
and come into
a wholeness

it is time to stop
and listen
to the old voices
to let the words
silenced before
in mid air
syllables scattered
searching
to come together
to come closer

stop stop following
false tracks
created by fake humans
that mislead
into anger and fear
poisoning your blood
with seeds of helplessness
shackling your spirit with
habit-induced sadness
dead limbs blocked ear
backs weighed down
limp with despair

they watch
and wait
for that moment
you allow them
to hang you
on their sterile walls
that celebrate
for a brief moment
their self-created godbeing

rain on African earth
whisperings lingering
amidst palm trees
our ancestors call
through our being breathing
pictures framed for profit
crumbling falling
image dressed beneath naked terror
peeling drumming
moments of devotion
a sacrifice
link to their memory
the bittersweet awakening
In two worlds
at the same time

Suleikha Ali Yusuf describes herself as a Somali African Canadian woman hyphenated at various crossroads. Living in Montreal and Ottawa for the last 14 years, she has worked in community building as a training co-ordinator, drummer, storyteller, researcher, conference and festival organizer, home helper, word processor, baby sitter, workshop developer, mother, and, last but not least, a PPP (professional paper pusher.) She is currently on a short work contract at Studio Danse Nyata-Nyata, where she is also taking part in the pilot project of African dance and percussion.

Teesri Duniya's

Untold Stories

Project Visits Polynation Festival

by David Fancy

Photography by Laurel Sprengelmeyer

On the morning of April 5, 2003, a caravan of cars and minivans brimming with participants of Teesri Duniya Theatre's community-based Untold Stories project braved the threat of SARS and departed from Montreal through a snowstorm in the direction of Toronto. The group had been invited to perform a theatrical presentation entitled *Rites of Passage* at the first ever Polynation Festival, hosted by Manaveli Performing Arts Group Canada.

The previous week, the Untold Stories group had presented *Rites of Passage*, based on a theatrical exploration of questions and issues of gender, to an audience of mixed ethnicity at Concordia University's Loyola Campus. I was the director of this piece, which was the second episode in an ongoing series of presentations based on little-known or untold stories collected from and by project participants.

This episode, following the trajectory of the segment entitled *Borders* which preceded it in December 2002, was grounded in what Teesri Duniya artistic directors Edward Little and Rahul Varma term a "culturally sensitive dramaturgy." Indeed, Untold Stories can be most effectively categorized as "popular theatre" in that it attempts to express a specific community's stories, knowledge, and desires, and also in that it is fueled by an active recognition of specific audiences as both the source and the target of the material created. According to Little and Varma, the culturally sensitive dramaturgical approach to representation promotes the exploration of cultural diversity in staging practices and seeks narrative structures to contain the multiplicity of individual and ethnic perspectives represented by the group's participants. Varma specifies that "like Teesri Duniya's work in general, Untold Stories seeks to find creative inspiration from the community itself and to dedicate the art produced to the community from which we gather our creative inspirations." Varma clarifies the link between a careful response to a community and the reality of ethnic difference: "The work is based in the cultural experience of the community members: here lies the meaning of culturally sensitive dramaturgy."

Little's and Varma's assertions necessarily lead to the following questions: to what extent has the Untold Stories project actualized their objectives; how useful was the Manaveli experience in forwarding the project's agenda; and finally, how does Untold Stories compare with that of other projects represented at the Manaveli festival?

The "popular aspect" of the Untold Stories project has to date been fulfilled largely as a result of the structural relationship between the company and the communities it involves itself with, as well as being reflected in the rehearsal process leading to presentations. *Rites of Passage* was created in the context of partnerships between professional/emerging artists and culturally diverse community volunteers: former development workers, the politically sympathetic, individuals with a long-term relationship with Teesri Duniya, and a number of people from Montreal's Tamil communi-ty.



Working in conjunction with dancer/choreographer Anisa Cameron, musician Andrew Burr, poet Ehab Lotayef, and video artist Anna Phelan-Cox, I had led our large performance troupe — consisting of community artists, volunteers, and Concordia students — through a rehearsal process over twelve consecutive Monday evenings. We began in early January with a series of workshops based on Augusto Boal's Image Theatre. We had also explored through improvisation and theatre games how the theme of gender resonated with our participants.

The stories and memories generated through these early activities from our group, which was somewhat diverse both in gender and ethnic background, were dramatized with the collaboration of the leading artists and the troupe's research team. A variety of tech-

The work is based in the cultural experience of the community members: here lies the meaning of culturally sensitive dramaturgy.

niques — collaborative decision making, frequent discussion, group play-building techniques — were used to ensure that participants owned and controlled the process of making and showing the work as much as possible. The resulting hour-long prototype presentation was created in less than fifty hours of rehearsal time and it dramatized — by means of song, dance, direct address, and scenes of three to five minutes — a broad range of issues. The subject matter of the scenes included arranged marriage, the harsh reality of being a widow in the South Asian diasporic community, the challenge of male puberty, eating disorders, and the same-sex partnership between a Canadian citizen and a political refugee.

The troupe was rightfully pleased with the results of its explorations. "There was a lot less pressure in this project than in many

professional projects I've participated in," explains musician Andrew Burr. "*Rites of Passage* is not a 'star vehicle': we did not 'wow' our audience with convention, but with stories." The presentation of these stories, and the discussion that ensued, served as a provisional clearing of ground for action on certain issues. For example, in both Montreal and Toronto, Kamala Patpanathan presented a monologue of her experience of the social exclusion that comes from being a widow within the Tamil community. Individuals from a variety of backgrounds discovered common grounds in Kamala's story: some wept in recognition, others discussed the issue passionately following the performances.

This *Rites of Passage* episode walked a fine line. On the one hand, the stories reflected an ersatz multiculturalism reminiscent of the utopian (and ultimately nostalgic, exotifying, and exclusionary) cultural engineering policies of the Canadian Federal government of the 1970s. On the other, they presented a more fluid and responsive multicultural model, reflecting the contemporary understanding that an individual's ethnicity is always a hybrid phenomenon: one which is anchored in both the past and the present. A certain spirit of "camp" self-awareness in the troupe itself, which also permeated the writing, music, and staging (such as Border's hilarious "refugee can-can"), drew attention to the fact that perceptions of ethnicity are culturally constructed and always changing rather than fixed, natural, and essential. This performance "flavour" also served to

The urban setting for the work permitted a rare opportunity for ethnically diverse voices to speak together in one location at one time.

counterbalance what might have become a cloying earnestness or a foregone conclusiveness about the piety of the project's objectives, qualities that can easily afflict such work.

Perhaps because of its roots in Concordia University, the company still seems rather "white" in its makeup, especially as regards the central artistic team (which is predominantly male as well). As the core artists on the project, we must, I feel, further challenge ourselves to explore how the middle-class provenance (and in most cases, aspirations) of many of the troupe's members might obscure the fact that many racial and ethnic issues actually have a strong socio-economic grounding. Seeking untold stories concerning poverty, as well as more vigorously attempting to include people (of any ethnicity) who suffer from its effects, would no doubt push back the borders of the entire project and indeed of its audiences, which up to now appear to be largely made up of people appreciative of the agendas behind the work before the presentations even begin. Indeed, *Untold Stories* strikes me as being a strong agent of societal integration for the recently arrived Canadian immigrants who have participated in it so far. For this reason, if for none other, those practising and leading this type of endeavour must constantly re-evaluate what types of societal hierarchies are being replicated within its boundaries and consider altering the structural foundation of the project accordingly.

The *Rites of Passage* episode amply demonstrated such challenges. The white suburban female agenda that currently dominates Canadian society infused the project's ethos to the point where masculinity was — as is currently the case in media, entertainment, and educational circles — generally vilified and pathologized. In addition,



tion, as a result of the project's as-of-yet unevolved recruitment strategies (or perhaps even of an unspoken and culturally anchored homophobia influencing the troupe's members of non-Western descent) most company members were representative of the heterosexual norm.

The troupe could continue to dig more deeply and honestly into contemporary reality, and it could also avoid the ad hoc sense of ideology and aesthetics that have ghosted the first two presentations. In order to do this, however, it must dedicate research and organizational time to articulating the project's agenda in terms accessible to all the troupe's members, provide more efficient leadership encouraging the troupe to look more closely — and openly — at its own internal "identity," and develop a comprehensive way of tracking audience response. Finding a way to acknowledge the francophone reality of Montreal in presentations, while avoiding the replication of potentially polarizing and dubious bicultural agendas, could also make the project more appealing to the communities it hopes to involve itself with in the future.

But now off to Toronto. The strong representation of Tamil individuals in the *Untold Stories* group led to the invitation to Toronto. Manaveli Performing Arts Group Canada consists largely of members of the Tamil diaspora, over 200,000 of whom have fled to Canada from the long-running ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. One of the Manaveli group's core members, Karthigesu Vijayasuganthan, explains that it was formed in 1996 by a number of visual, literary, and performing artists, and has been fueled by the philosophy that "exile is a very powerful force of creativity." To date, Manaveli has staged over thirty theatrical productions in Toronto based on "Tamilized" European classics of work by authors such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Chekhov, as well as on original scripts that "portray the nuances of the lost life in the country they once called home, and the trials and tribulations faced by their generation [. . .] in their adopted country" of Canada.

Karthigesu believes the Performing Arts Group has served an important function within the diasporic Tamil community:

I think that Manaveli is a perfect example of what role a theatre plays in human life. None of the Manaveli participants are drama and theatre professionals. None of us knew each other back home. As a minority ethnic group we went through lots of discrimination and struggle. Most of us came to Canada as refugees. Again we are a minority group in another country. We are facing most of the same issues in a different dimension. Manaveli has provided a home away from home and also a space to express our feelings [. . .] Now,



Manaveli plays a very big role in making our day to day life more meaningful and enjoyable.

Recently, the Manaveli group realized the need for an English-based festival when they set their sights on reaching the next and future generation of Tamils. The group felt that a festival bringing together artists from a variety of cultural realities could serve as an important meeting ground through which to share work and experiences of cultural difference while contributing to a contemporary multi-ethnic Canadian reality.

This first Polynation festival was prompted, Karthigesu explains, by a workshop hosted by University of Toronto's Cultural Pluralism and the Arts project, and was led by theatre artist and activist Chuck Mike. With a career in both professional theatre and theatre for social change that spans three decades — not to mention the continents of North America and Africa — Mike is well-positioned to create new work with a group of actors from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The workshop was initially conceived as a preliminary exploration of the technicalities of multiple role-playing for a production of Biyi Bandele's *Things Fall Apart* at the University of Toronto. Mike explains that the workshop "also had its own agenda in terms of getting participants to express their thoughts on issues around them." He uses a variety of improvisation techniques — many of these revolving around the challenges of playing multiple characters — in which each participant applies his or her own theme and develops a solo piece. Like the Untold Stories project, the activity of creation and feedback leading to further creation at the heart of Mike's work implicitly recognizes the quality of process which motivates popular theatre work.

Mike asserts that issue-based work is essential. He has "always believed that when you have the opportunity to arrest eyes and ears you should make people aware of some of the sordidness around them." Theatre, he feels, is very a "persuasive" medium, and it functions "to bring people together into the same space," a reality that is "a starting point for generating the types of discussion necessary to positively impact society." Depending on how the theatrical experience is shaped and contextualized for both the performer and the spectator, participants at both ends of the spectrum "can make life-changing commitments which have an impact on themselves, others, and the community at large."

The workshop resulted in a performance piece entitled *Pollination* and included performances by Aktina Stathaki, Rhoma Spencer, Suganthan, Nalina, and Rebecca Fisseha, representing Greek, Ethiopian, Caribbean, and Tamil heritages. The themes explored included cultural isolation and displacement, the search for cultural and individual identities, youth violence, and the questioning of traditional rites and celebrations in the new world.

In addition to *Pollination* and *Rites of Passage*, two Manaveli performances filled out the event. In *Lone Tree*, the classical Tamil dance *Bharathanatyam* took on a new meaning and mode. Based on a poem by Cheran — a well-known Tamil literary figure — the dance featured the story of an ancient cedar tree that symbolizes the spirit of nature. It was directed and performed by well-known classical dancer Malini Pararajasingham. The second piece, Premil's *The Perpetual Cycle*, was a mime parody of "the beginnings, travels, and travails of *homo sapiens*, also known as human beings." It was direct-

ed by Ira Sivaratnam and featured Sabesan, Baheerathan, and Suganthan.

Following the performances, an open discussion session between the artists and the audience provided the spectators with the opportunity to explain what they took away from the performances, as well as what they desired to see more of. Audience feedback, suggests Little, "underlines the notion that the work is not considered complete without response from community, which can lead to further refinement of the work, which leads to more feedback sessions and so on." Since Untold Stories is a participatory project, "the audience has to be involved in the creation of the work. This isn't always possible during the initial creation phase, so we establish a recurring dialogue with our audiences by means of our theatrical presentations."

Mike felt that the Polynation experience was "incredibly wholesome" and generally "provided a platform for sharing experiences in theatrical and cultural terms for the audiences involved" while also "allowing audiences to think about issues it may not ordinarily have had the opportunity to — singularly and collectively in an experiential way." Mike, Little, and Karthigesu felt that the urban setting for the work permitted a rare opportunity for ethnically diverse voices to speak together in one location at one time. "It was a very mixed gathering on stage and in the audience," affirmed Mike, and therefore it "holds an amazing potential to bring 'true' credibility to the notion of 'diversity' in Toronto." Mike's experience with urban diversity has often been "different people inhabiting the same space but doing things separately."

For his part, Little describes the challenges of creating a sustainable urban-based popular theatre ensemble: "[I]n rural projects, you have a real advantage, since gathering people together from a community defined by limited geographical boundaries generally guarantees engaging across difference." The dynamics are quite different in a city, he explains, as various communities in one geographical area might not necessarily intersect. "We have worked very hard on questions of adequate scheduling and rehearsal protocol to be able to make use of the diversity in a city such as Montreal, to engage the multiple voices in a common pursuit."

Karthigesu explains that the Polynation festival received a positive response from the Tamil community, whose members comprised approximately half of the two hundred people present for the event. "The success of the first Polynation program has given us a great deal of confidence, and we are thinking about developing some community-based programs and working with a variety of community theatres." Indeed, plans are currently afoot for adopting some of the major participatory approaches of Teesri's Untold Stories project and Chuck Mike's work, which would help them to move beyond the vaguely stale Tamilization of European classics and to foreground the experience of diaspora for their non-Tamil audiences.

There are rumours of possible collaborations between the different companies that could help Manaveli actualize a desire to use theatre as part of an ongoing process of identifying issues of concern for their spectators, with resulting theatrical presentations serving to analyze and present how change could occur. Chuck Mike looks forward to the unfolding of the Polynation festival and all the possibilities it holds as a location for forging increasingly refined popular

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Dramatizing the Dead First Nations
Female Body to Define and Defy
BC Regionalism: Marie Clements's

The Unnatural and Accidental Women

by Christopher Grignard

Marie Clements is an award-winning Metis performer and playwright, and artistic director of Vancouver-based Urban Ink Productions. She has written eight plays. Her latest, *Burning Vision*, toured in 2003 to the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques (Montreal) and Magnetic North Theatre Festival (Ottawa), and was nominated for a Governor General's Award.

In a special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review*, aptly titled *Staging the Pacific Province*, Reid Gilbert, in a retrospect of the first ever BC theatre conference in 1999, asks whether “BC Theatre” exists as an authentic category. This category, if it does exist, becomes an unsettling one when the script being categorized is Marie Clements's *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*.

Unnatural is based on documentary sources about Gilbert Paul Jordan's serial murder of at least ten Native women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside between 1965 and 1987. At the same time *CTR* went into press with the play's working version, it went into full production as part of Vancouver's New Play Festival at the Firehall Arts Centre: a venue which, with grim coincidence, is located in the neighbourhood where the murders took place. *Unnatural* is published in three texts, which is impressive for a play that has been out for only four years. Clements is currently working on its film adaptation through a fellowship with the BC Film Commission. Gilbert suggests that it is Clements's work, particularly *Unnatural*, that “carves itself into the record of the BC conference [...] creating a stage on which murdered First Nations women may act themselves into any subjective definition of regionalism” (5).

The question then that ignites my own search is this: How can murdered BC First Nations women “carve” a category that will aid in a “subjective definition” of Vancouver's lower Eastside? In light of the unfolding current events regarding Robert Pickton, another Vancouver serial killer, the timing of the special *CTR* issue, Gilbert's editorial, and Clements's evocative work all become increasingly urgent with their investigation into BC and its bizarre regional representations.

The re-visioning of regional space through theatre, indeed, is key to exploring the transformative BC theatre aesthetic that Clements uses. *Unnatural*, through the female victims of a serial killer, “carves” a staging of the Pacific province at the heart of Vancouver's lower Eastside at the same time that it ruptures conventions of the documentary drama. The play's form strategically challenges the pre-conceived definitions of BC's regional space made through media, tourism, and by reputation alone. And Clements's use of site-specific locations within Vancouver's lower Eastside enables the women's ghosts to subjectively define and defy the spaces that have been unforgiving to them.

British Columbia theatre academic Celeste Derkson notes, “[t]he notion of BC and BCers as oddball, eccentric and given to

extremes is a widely held conception or myth” (50). Indeed, BC's reputation, outside its drama, has been defined as “strange,” “bizarre,” and “weird”: stereotypes that Clements certainly plays off in her play. BC's official (and eccentric) provincial motto is “Super, Natural British Columbia.”¹ Born and raised in Kelowna, BC, I am fixated by my home province's various regional landscapes. The wide range of landscapes penetrates the subconscious, forever altering the way one thinks. It is understandable then to respond, as Clements does, through playwriting when one sees how a region, such as Vancouver's lower Eastside, is abused and misrepresented.

In an interview with Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman, Clements identifies herself as being a BC playwright only when she's “somewhere else,” stating that “west coast writers definitely have different perspectives from those on the east coast” (Ratsoy 474). She feels that *Unnatural* is a BC play “in the sense that the land and the evolution of this specific area is the environment of the play — from the trees to the hotels [...] In that way, it goes to this place and time where these women are now standing where trees used to stand” (474). *Unnatural* is filled with images and sounds of forests being decimated. The play begins and ends with similar sound effects with trees: “a collage of trees whispering in the wind” (478); “[...]the sound of their voices becomes the sound of trees” (520). In both cases, these are quickly followed by the sounds of trees coming down.

These sound effects are particularly evocative for anyone who is familiar with BC's forestry industry, or who has seen the gouges in the land that are the bleak result of insensitive clear-cutting. The trees are clearly metaphoric for the women dramatized. The audience hears the sounds of chainsaws and sees flying wooden chips, and the resulting tree stumps are then transformed into the Empress Hotel: the place where Jordan meets his victims. The action in this play is circular: in the first act the women have been cut down and resurrected in various site-specific hotels in the lower Eastside. However, in the second act the women return to the hotel to meet Jordan, transcending their space by taking revenge for their deaths.

BC's first major collection of plays, *Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000*, begins and ends with a First Nations female body. It opens with George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) and concludes with Clements's *Unnatural*. The bracketing of the compilation with these two plays creates a dialogue between these texts. Both dramas use the documentary form and they are both based on newspaper items about a dead Native woman in Vancouver's lower Eastside. Their haunting background soundscapes clearly situate the plays in the heart of Vancouver. And both plays “proved the efficacy of theatre as a medium of social comment and community discourse” (Ratsoy 476). In its place as the concluding play of the anthology, *Unnatural* is both working with and transcending definitions of BC regionalism previously carved out by other dramatized First Nations female bodies, such as the landmark *Rita Joe*.



The trope of the abused and murdered First Nations female body has been recognized and mined for commentary both on colonization and on healing, two conventional topics that seemingly go hand in hand when approaching a First Nations text.² Indeed, given Canada's history of violent erasure and ethnic cleansing of indigenous people, a colonial reading can work with *Unnatural*, whose murdered First Nations women are victims of a white man. Alcohol is the primary instrument Gilbert Paul Jordan uses to conquer the women: in several instances, Jordan offers drinks to the women, and he chants, "Down the hatch, baby. Twenty bucks if you drink it right down." But a crucial reading of *Unnatural* has also been as a healing narrative.³ Based upon a true story about a large number of murdered First Nations women, *Unnatural* undoubtedly aided in the invocation of closure for the friends and families of the female victims. The play "succeed[ed] in commemorating the women and in connecting their lives to each other and to the audience" (Hoffman and Ratsoy 475).

However, what renders *Unnatural* unique is how Clements plays with the documentary form, and how she reconstructs the women into, what Ric Knowles calls, a "poetic docu-memory play" (247).⁴ Her play transcends those conventional readings of post-colonial and healing narratives. The women in *Unnatural* function as individuals, who return to a specific area and challenge a space in which they have been unfairly defined after their death — largely by the media — as being just bodies, products of their environment. The media reduced these First Nations women to non-humans, many of them left nameless. In some cases, they were reported as simply dying of consumption, with no evidence presented of foul play. According to the Vancouver Sun article ("Death By Alcohol" October 22, 1988) that inspired Clements to write the play, their deaths were "unnatural and accidental." In an interview with James Hoffman, Clements speaks of the four-page spread: "It was quite a detailed story of Gilbert Paul Jordan's career and of these events. I guess what really put me over was that it was a huge spread on him and maybe half a page of all of his victims, and very little of them as human beings — just basically their last traced days" (Ratsoy 475). Clements defies the media constructions by defining the women, not Jordan, as the main point of her play.

Richard J. Lane emphasizes the displacement he sees as being "embedded in BC theatre." He asserts, "BC is a palimpsest of displaced cultures in which the layering is not neutral, but held in a powerful political tension" (8). That political tension, I find, often lies in the marginalized voices in BC. In reference to Vancouver's Eastside, there is indeed a collection of unheard voices. *Unnatural* is a significant example of staging BC regionalism because its supernatural form uproots those buried voices embedded in the layered ground. The character Rebecca asserts, "The only problem is you can't melt an Indian. You can't kill a stone. You can grind it down to sand, but it's still there sifting through everything forever" (510).

But *Unnatural* recognizes that one cannot fully dramatize a region through a single body; therefore, Clements calls up ten women's voices, each with "[its] own particular landscape within [its] own particular hotel room and world" (477). And what makes this particular region heard is how the women are unified in the play. Like the unification of plays in an anthology, a variety of voices provide a definition of a region. The women's voices within *Unnatural* pull together in order to communicate to Rebecca, the

only woman alive in the play, who goes to Hastings and searches for answers in the disappearance of her mother, Aunt Shadie: "I'm looking for my Mom. She went for a walk twenty years ago, and I haven't seen her since" (509). When the women in the play are all revealed as being dead, they begin to chant, "Do I hear you sister like yesterday today?" (497) followed by several indigenous phrases. The women's individual "calls" to one another continue to "grow in strength and intensity to the end of Act One where all their voices join force" (496). This powerful unison of voices exemplifies Clements's subjective defining of a region.

Clements uses the documentary format to go back in time in order to insert a narrative that portrays and celebrates the women as individuals. As occurs with individuals in the documentary format, the dead women are re/constructed through language, and they are given voices. Act One uses familiar tropes from the documentary genre. Slides reveal information on the dead women, at the same time overlooking the women's tragic situations: "Mavis Gertrude Jones, 42. Died November 30, 1980 with a 0.34 blood alcohol reading. An inquiry concluded Jones' death was "unnatural and accidental" (496). The slides also indicate various hotels the women inhabit (Gleniard, Balmoral, Niagara, Clifton). The backdrops evoke specific landscapes: the huge "W" of the Woodward's building, close-ups of Hastings Street "when it was the centre of shopping" (482), The Army and Navy, Woolworth's, and Pigeon Square.

Unnatural is a significant example of staging BC regionalism because its supernatural form uproots those buried voices embedded in the layered ground.

The detailed opening stage directions — "colour of memory and the searching" (477) — emphasize the central theme of investigation.

Rebecca represents the curious spectator who looks at Hastings Street and asks, as she does, "Where do women walk to when they have been fallen" (492). Moreover, Ron, Rebecca's romantic interest, represents the spectator who sees the East Hastings area through his own definition: the people who live there, he hesitatingly says, are "mostly drunks and junkies and Ind...First Na..." (509). He questions Rebecca: "Since you're there [Hastings Street], why do you think so many end up down there?" (510). Rebecca immediately challenges Ron's perceptions of the space. I see her reply as being very much an angered response provoked by an ignorant mindset: "Since you asked, I don't think so many of them end up down there. I think so many people end up down there. Period" (510).

Unnatural finds other ways to challenge established definitions. For instance, the play rapidly departs from the documentary genre in Act Two, as the dead women are depicted in a bizarre form that is completely different from that of the first act. Clements twists the play, "tak[ing] the documentary to rarely explored places" (Ratsoy 475). Ironically, it is in the twisted second act that *Unnatural* brings celebration, life, and new meaning to these women's lives, which otherwise would be generally viewed as tragic. Who would have thought from the seriousness of Act One that in the next act the women would be seen together sifting through

Rebecca's possessions in her Kitsilano home, trying on her clothes, make-up, and perfume? The women ghosts discuss a range of topics: sexual scenarios involving horses and mounties (Verna admits to "getting all horny"), reading novels while sitting on the toilet, masturbation, ordering pizza. Valerie tries on Rebecca's underwear, while Mavis desires to pull the covers off to see Ron's naked ass (which Valerie ends up pinching!). Thus, confronting these dead women in the second act becomes a comedic, and "often celebratory," experience (Ratsoy 475). It is here that their personalities really come through, as Clements carves them into a "subjective definition

Confronting these dead women in the second act becomes a comedic, and "often celebratory," experience.

of regionalism." On one hand, they can be seen as perpetuating the eccentric myths of BC. On the other, the women defy the definitions that have been assigned to them: mere bodies, coroner blurbs, de-humanized drunks, non-individuals, "unnatural and accidental." Now, they are portrayed as being human, "vibrant, sensual, and life-affirming (even after death)" (Knowles 250).

However, in the midst of the frivolity of the second act, the themes of search and discovery remain. The women revisit their area of death and share their questions and personal stories with one another. Violet, the youngest in the group of murdered women, asks twice, "Why do you think we're here" (508, 513). The women's responses are similar in nature: "That's a big question" (513). Towards the end of the second act, the women meet at the bar inside the Empress Hotel in order to intervene in Rebecca's life, as she too comes face to face with Jordan. Several women speak their mind to Jordan, as Verna says, "Listen you moron, I'm talking to you. Oh bald one. Don't think I even went around with you because you are good-looking or nothing — you're ugly. Ugly ... look at those glasses — four eyes — big eyes bulging out like you're looking at headlights or something. Big dumb ... Stupid" (514). Verna then slaps him up the side of his head. Some of the women are able to find answers to their own bewilderment. Valerie comments, "We all thought he was someone we knew. Someone we needed" (516). Like the women, we wait for something to arise: justice, answers, revenge. Three women confront Jordan in a seductive movement sequence that involves them pouring beer down his throat and applying lipstick to his lips. Eventually the women kill Jordan in his barbershop, and Rebecca hands them back the hair braids that he had taken from them. Rebecca restores the women's identities and dignities, and at the same time attains an understanding of a regional space:

Aunt Shadie. ... like a map, my body knowing every turn, every tree, every curve the land uses to confuse us.

Rebecca. ... like a map, my body knowing every turn, every lie, every curve, the land uses to kill us. (519)

This poignant exchange between mother and daughter illustrates that Rebecca is now able to read the map her mother could not. Rebecca is now able to identify what was confusing to her dead mother. Rebecca recognises how a "map" — the counterfeit definition of a location that has been thrust upon the both of them — has been used to both lie to them and kill them.

Unnatural continues to have an immediate significance in Vancouver. The city's current murder investigation — a lower main-

land suburban pig farm discovered to be the gruesome site of burial for many women (First Nations among them) — is once again perpetuating the "extreme" perception of BC regional space. The haunting search embodied in Clements's *Unnatural* is an invaluable addition to those that continue to be conducted on the many regional spaces in Super, Natural British Columbia. ●

¹ See the official site of tourism British Columbia <http://www.hel-lobc.com>.

² I deliberately use and emphasise "female body" as opposed to "woman," because the latter implies subjectivity and humanness.

³ See Gisolfi's article, "Native Women Playwrights: Transmitters, Healers, Transformers. The Native American Women Playwrights Archive: Adding Voices." Gisolfi re-enforces the conception of Native women writers as "healers."

⁴ I am grateful to Knowles for supplying me with a draft of his essay before it was published. Knowles was involved in a collaborative research project on First Nations cultural memory and feminist memorializing of violence against women in Canada. Knowles' analysis of female violence in drama as representing specific community dismemberment and cultural re-membering informs my own work. Knowles highlights enactments of cultural memory such as Vancouver's annual 'Valentine Day March,' which dramatizes the remembrance of recent locally murdered victims. The march takes place in the same neighbourhood and contested site where Marie Clements locates *Unnatural*.

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The Plum Tree

Finding Its Roots in Southern Alberta

by Misty Cozac

Photography by Brian C. Parkinson

In the summer of 1998, playwright Mitch Miyagawa decided to visit his father's childhood home in Mission, B.C. In his recounting of this journey, however, he describes himself as unable to take a decisive step into the past. "It was the first time I had seen [the house]. It was a plain, stuccoed house in a normal neighbourhood. We didn't knock. This [play] is my way of knocking" (Program 1).

The play he is speaking of is *The Plum Tree*, which was produced in October 2003 by New West Theatre at the Sterndale Bennett in Lethbridge, Alberta. The run consisted of eight shows, and the intimate venue was sold out for almost all performances.

all over Lethbridge. They never talked much about what happened during the war, but in some ways, that mystery made me even more curious as I grew older. So having *The Plum Tree* in Lethbridge was a kind of homecoming.

Lethbridge's was the third mounting of Miyagawa's play. *The Plum Tree* received its first production in 2002 at Nakai Theatre in Whitehorse, Yukon, where Miyagawa currently lives and writes. It then went on to be performed in 2003 as a part of the National playRites festival at Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary. However, prior to the latter production, Miyagawa had brought the play to be work-shopped at the University of Lethbridge as part of their New Plays in Development course. This is where Brian C. Parkinson,



Scenes from *The Plum Tree*. Above left; left to right Blaine Takeda, Wally Houn, and Erica Hunt. Above: Blaine Takeda and Wally Houn. Above right: Wally Houn.

The popularity of the play made it clear that the issues it raises are of particular significance to a Southern Alberta audience.

The play tells the story of a Japanese-Canadian man coming to terms with his family's history. The history of Japanese-Canadians in Southern Alberta is a painful and often suppressed one. Most Japanese-Canadians were brought to the area from the coast of British Columbia during the World War II evacuation. Many remained after the ban had been lifted, creating new lives for themselves and their families. Most families had left nearly everything behind when evacuated. Speaking of these lost possessions and memories was usually avoided in an effort to move into the future. This choice reflects the Japanese idea of *shikataga-nai*, meaning "nothing can be done."

Miyagawa was eager to have his play produced in Southern Alberta. As he puts it, Southern Alberta is where many Japanese-Canadians ended up during the war, and where many of them started their lives again — my father's family included. In many ways, it's where this play was born, sitting around tables of sushi and cold KFC with my grandma, aunts, uncles, and cousins

artistic director of New West Theatre, was introduced to the play. Through the course of the workshop, Parkinson became more interested in taking the play to New West: "At the end of the week-long process I asked Mitch if he'd like to see his play produced in Lethbridge, since it would be of so much relevance to so many in this community" (Program 3).

The play also fit New West Theatre's new mandate. This theatre has been best known in the community for producing large-scale musical revues twice a year. However, this past year they introduced a smaller second season in the adjacent 180-seat theatre. The first play New West produced in this space was *Mourning Dove* by Emil Sher, also a premiere production. *Mourning Dove* dealt with the issues brought up by the infamous Robert Latimer case in Saskatchewan. *The Plum Tree* was to be the second play produced in this "second season." And it seemed like an ideal choice, not only because of its Japanese-Canadian connection but because, as Parkinson put it, it fulfilled "our continuing commitment to bring challenging new theatre experiences to our audience" (Program 3).

The play follows the fictional character of George Murakami

as he returns to his father's childhood home. His initial motivation is to reclaim the family's dishes that had been buried and left behind. But through the imagined instigation of his dead uncle, he initiates a friendship with the elderly inhabitant of the property, in the hopes of purchasing the home himself and turning it into a museum. For George, it is a constant struggle between, on the one hand, the subconscious voice of his outspoken, resentful uncle urging him to "reclaim" what was once theirs, and, on the other, the influence of his traditional father, who George believes would wish him to move on and not re-live the past.

This struggle between the outspoken and the silent is very common among Japanese-Canadians born years after the internment of their ancestors. They are raised very "Canadian," meaning they are taught to question and understand their society. However, the attitude of *shikataga-nai* is still very prevalent in the thinking of their parents and grandparents. Thus, it is difficult for this new generation to find answers to questions about their family history, questions that, according to those who hold the answers, are considered better left unasked.

I was brought into the 2003 production as director soon after returning to Canada from Japan, where I had spent two years. Being the child of a Japanese-Canadian mother, I had become very interested in my ancestry when my family moved to Southern Alberta when I was thirteen years old. I thought being around a larger Japanese-Canadian community and my Japanese grandmother would incite discussion about my family's history. Instead, I only created awkward silences when my questions addressed a time whose memories had been suppressed, even by the victims of that time's defining oppression.

Oddly though, the theatre is deemed to be an acceptable arena in which to address these topics. My first opportunity to participate in such exploration arrived in the play *Winter Pond* by Richard Epp, which was performed in 1997 at the University of Lethbridge. I played a young Japanese-Canadian mother whose family had been relocated to Southern Alberta. My questions about that period were answered under the guise of "creating a character" and peaked my interest further.

After my two years spent in Japan, I had a better understanding of the mentality of *shikataga-nai*. A friend made the analogy of the society of Japan being like a large serene pond and each person an inhabitant of this pond. In order to avoid "upsetting the waters," each person must adopt the idea of not letting things bother them and move on. My family had chosen to move on and not talk about their painful past.

When I read the script of *The Plum Tree*, I discovered a character coming to terms with his two worlds, as I had. Once again, through theatre I was being given an opportunity to address questions in my family history and possibly raise a few new ones, largely because this play's central character is from a generation not often addressed in stories of the evacuation.

Even though Southern Alberta has a large Japanese-Canadian population, most are not actors. It was a challenge for our small regional theatre to find a cast, in particular the lead role. Eventually, I ended up casting the general manager of a local golf course who auditioned for the play "because a friend had suggested it." Initially, Blaine Takeda's reasons for taking on the role were not the same as my own: "I took this on for personal growth. I wanted to learn how to express myself and communicate better" (quoted in Beeber, "Branching Out").

However, through the process of preparing for the play, Takeda had a reason to talk to his family about the events that had happened so many years ago. Undoubtedly, this assisted this novice

actor in his portrayal of George Murakami. As Al Beeber wrote in his review of the production, "Takeda, the son of evacuees, is so convincing, so real, it's almost disturbing to think the guy is actually acting" ("Theatre Review").

Each of the performances was followed by a discussion forum with the audience, in which the actors and myself participated. Each night's audience had a different take on the production. The younger members of the audience always had historical questions. And the new perspective the play displayed always incited discussion.

In the end, *The Plum Tree* wasn't a production intended to preach to people about the injustices felt by Japanese-Canadians during and after World War II. Nor was it a history lesson. The play's purpose was to bring to light for the audience members an aspect of a subject matter not addressed before. For myself, although perhaps not for all involved in the production, it provided an outlet for cultural self-discovery.

For Miyagawa, even if the play had started as an exploration of what might have happened if he had knocked on that door at that plain, stuccoed house, his experience of the process in retrospect relates more to his role as a playwright:

This play has meant the same as other writing I have done: it was a chance to delve into and to express the shades of grey of human experience that are so wonderful and so painful at the same time [...] The story of *The Plum Tree*, for me, is ultimately a universal one, about losing a father, and about creating meaning from one's legacy from past generations. ●

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theatre work with radical egalitarian objectives: "I hope Polynation is continued and hope to have more input in its evolution. Aspects of it can certainly become more evolved - in particular: choice of material, audience/player interaction, as well as the shaping of post-performance discourse." Indeed, the festival will be much more useful for all participants if formalized opportunities for exchange between practitioners, such as discussion groups or short workshops, are introduced. Anisa Cameron speaks, I believe for the wider Untold Stories group when she suggests that "we certainly look forward to being part of this ongoing process of Polynation's evolution." For the moment however, the Untold Stories project is most likely to benefit most by investing its energies in clarifying its objectives and internal structures, and bringing smaller presentations to its immediate constituents in Montreal. ●

Polynation took place on 6 April 2003 at the York Woods Library Theatre in Toronto. Manaveli's website is www.Manaveli.org

David Fancy holds a PhD from Trinity College, Dublin's Samuel Beckett Centre.

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