



vol.3, no.2 Summer 2004

theatre

cultural
diversity and
the stage



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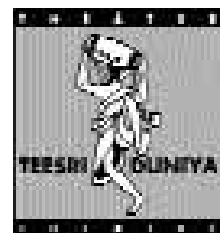
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Cover Photo: Photographer, Joshua Barnes
L - R Danel Victoria Verdugo as Okatsu (merchant mother),
Lei Sadakari as Osome (daughter) Jessica Jacob as Boatman

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Editorial

Report from RITI

This is the first of my editorials from the road — somewhere I will be spending a lot of time as I cross the country mapping Canada's theatrical "ecology" during my research leave from Concordia University.

Among my first stops was *Rencontres Internationales de Théâtre d'Intervention* (RITI) — a small-scale conference on popular theatre that brought together companies and practitioners working in various areas of political, activist, feminist, community-based, and forum theatre for panels, papers, talks, and shows. RITI was hosted by Théâtre Parminou in collaboration with the Belgium-based *Centre de Théâtre Action* between June 3 and 6 in Victoriaville, Quebec. Defining social intervention post-9/11 was a central concern.

Intervention in popular theatre is defined by varying degrees of community participation in the theatrical event. The work negotiates complex social and cultural working environments and continues to exist in spite of almost non-existent arts funding. The breadth of approaches and work shared at RITI, together with the commitment and determination of practitioners attending, was inspiring. At the same time, the relative absence of culturally diverse voices — especially in debates in which they are so central — was disturbing. While much of the work was directly involved with cultural diversity, there were almost no delegates of colour present in leadership positions. Given RITI's modest size and budget, the absence of delegates from countries where popular theatre is widely used — Africa, India, and Latin America, for example — is perhaps understandable. However, if the conference provided any kind of representative cross-section, those identifying themselves as popular theatre workers in Canada remain conspicuously white.

There are, of course, extenuating circumstances. Popular and community-based work exists at the very margins of theatre, and artists who work in both mainstream and popular theatre are rare. Even within the arts, we continue to be plagued by the binary conceptions of art versus social action, popular versus mainstream, and amateur versus professional, as well as the view that theatre, dance, and music are mutually exclusive spheres. The aesthetics of integrating art and social action are often misguidedly subjected to Eurocentric criteria of artistic excellence, and popular theatre is further devalued when seen merely as a stepping stone to the mainstream. Because of these factors, the primary concern of most popular theatre workers is simple survival. Resources for travel, outreach, and networking are non-existent, and any funds directed to these ends subtracts from resources for projects. In the 1990s, the Canadian Popular theatre Alliance ceased to exist for precisely these reasons. Without such an organization, popular theatre artists who do not have an established profile simply do not register on the radar — their work remains isolated and unknown.

For the minority artist, there are additional complications. There is a fear that working in popular theatre will hinder recognition as a "legitimate" artist — that the ghettoized or overtly politicized aspects of popular theatre will be a liability in a career where there are already too few opportunities. At the same time, working within the existing terms of the mainstream risks supporting what Smaro Kamboureli describes as the "sedative" politics of Canadian multiculturalism, wherein the immigrant experience is characterized as "an obstacle to be overcome." Success for the minority artist offers proof of the efficacy of Canada's Multicultural Act — offering yet another resonant and uplifting image of Canadian ethnicity. System discrimination and aesthetic orthodoxies remain entrenched when the artistic energies of the essentialized Immigrant are spent coping with, as opposed to challenging, dominant constructions of the ethnicity and cultural expression.

One response to this is the growing number of companies with mandates relating to specific communities and issues of cultural diversity — Black Theatre Workshop, Obsidian Theatre, De-ba-jeh-mu-jig, and the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company come to mind. Others, such as Teesri Duniya, NeWorld, and Cahoots, are working in cross- or inter-cultural contexts. Each is performing cultural activism. For these companies, initiatives such as the Canada Council's Stand Firm are providing opportunities for sharing successful artistic and administrative practices (see the forthcoming article on Stand Firm in *alt.theatre* vol 3.3).

These companies and artists working in popular theatre would appear to be natural allies. Each shares a concern with new and culturally democratic approaches to the creation of socially engaged theatre. In her research on popular theatre, Catherine Graham examines why activists are drawn to theatre. She notes that while participation in the public life of liberal democracies is theoretically possible, actual opportunities for doing so are declining. Popular theatre is attractive because it offers a powerful means of collective expression that promotes localized resistance to globalization by creating participatory networks of communication and action that involve a range of professional and non-professional artists, community organizations, and agencies concerned with social change.

A central question for popular theatre at this juncture is whether to find ways to enter into the mainstream or to remain outside and define an independent territory. I would argue that a combination of these approaches is necessary. Mutually beneficial alliances with theatres of cultural diversity are key, as are greater attention to art and the aesthetic principles informing the creation and evaluation of popular theatre.

Each of the articles in this issue speaks to elements of this. Julie Salverson argues the importance of art in community-based work. Guillermo Verdecchia writes about an aesthetics of protest. Rawi Hage examines representations of difference in media as manifestations of entrenched racism. And James Forsythe considers some of the ethical implications involved in importing traditional approaches to Eastern forms.

Edward Little

See a
note to
the editor
on page
15 under
"inbox"

IMAGINATION

and Art in Community Arts

by Julie Salverson

I want to start with poetry. “It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.” Words from a poet, William Carlos Williams. I fell in love with art as a child. I grew up and wanted others to know this language, this difficult place of desire and danger, this invitation to imagine. This language for the inexpressible. In my early twenties I was working in theatres across Canada and started to feel a split between my late-blooming political awareness and my love for art. I became involved in the peace and solidarity movements, and I would go from a rehearsal in a mainstage theatre to a community organizing meeting and think, “Wouldn’t art be a useful way to help this process of learning to live together in neighbourhoods?” I started imagining how this could look. I wanted to make theatre in community centres, to — as I put it then — “get the untold stories told.” I was very lucky in 1981 to get a Canada Council Explorations Grant to develop a play for an audience of people who were mentally disabled. I found out, by accident, that developing a play *with* this audience was much more satisfying — was electrifying even — than merely developing one *for* them. The accident was this: I was doing a series of weekly workshops with a group of about fifteen adults, most of whom lived in group homes. I did improvisation exercises with them. It was dreadful — experimenting and failing. Then one evening while we were all sitting in a circle, a man arrived late. He was in his early forties; David was his name. He always wore a cowboy hat and carried a lasso. He’d gotten lost on the subway and wanted to talk about it. I let him. Then, for some reason, I turned to the rest of the group and said, “Has anyone else ever gotten lost?” Everybody had, and the energy in that room exploded. So I said, “Well . . . why don’t you get into three groups, and one make a song, one a scene, and one a dance about what it’s like to get lost.”

That accident changed my life. It revealed the electricity that happens when people speak and are heard, and it also illustrated that what we offer as writers or dancers or musicians or painters is simply another language for that speech. A language that shapes loss and love and hope into a form. And those images that take that language beyond the everyday — that raise it to something that can make us all tremble, just a little — those are poetry. This is true whether the images are musical, visual, or theatrical. Our job as artists is to seek out, find, and name them. Of course, it isn’t quite that simple. Who, and why, and when, and where also must be addressed, as well as historical, cultural, and ethical frameworks. I’ll get to some of that in a moment.

The project in 1981 grew into the almost-ten-year-run of a company in Toronto called Second Look Community Arts Resource. It’s hard to imagine now, but in the early ‘80s you had to really persuade most arts organizations to give you a grant that involved communities; most thought that kind of work was social work or education. The Toronto Arts Council was a notable exception; also, interestingly enough, were the churches, which had seen how art and politics are not so separate in other cultures. I think, by the way, that now

the balance has tipped the other way: you have to make the argument not for community but for art. We are still polarized. However, in 1981 Second Look worked collectively, god help us, and we made it to community centres such as Regent Park, Central Neighbourhood House, and Scadding Court. And we developed plays with sole-support moms and with young people. Plays about AIDS, about dealing with welfare and the street, about racism: many issues. And what happened was that I got very tired of the kind of theatre we were making: the issues took over the art. So, around 1990, I left. I worked full-time with Theatre of the Oppressed, moving around Canada and a bit in the US, working with Headlines Theatre in Vancouver. And again, I got tired of the theatre we were making and I left. I went to England, but even a rejuvenating stint with Welfare State International and the celebratory adventures of their very politically astute community arts didn’t help. I had learned a lot over fifteen years — from popular education, from Paulo Friere, from liberation theology, from development education — but still I was tiring of the need to argue for art. I thought this thing about art was my problem, was about my personal taste. I had been busy trying to make the revolution, but I had gotten lonely for the theatre. I thought that art had to take a back seat to community development, to social change. I thought art was (as Honor Ford Smith has described theatre for development in Jamaica) to “sugar the pill of the more serious business of education.” But over the next ten years — spent mostly writing and teaching writing, sometimes in community project, sometimes in schools — I rediscovered poetry and theatre. I realized that what I’d thought was my personal taste (wondering, “Is the form beautiful, political, powerful, edgy?”) was actually a matter of ethics. I came to this in part from going back to school myself, doing graduate work, and learning about how people struggle through the difficulty of building memorials, creating public memo-

“Art is a language for imagining different futures, experiencing the past and the present from other angles, and learning to live.” //

ry, translating testimony: things I realized I was doing in participatory theatre. Most of my work has been with survivors of violence. What could the connections be between the form of the theatre we make and the degree of respect and complexity afforded to the stories we tell? I’m going to turn very briefly to some of the projects I’ve done in the last ten years, and — in postcard fashion — highlight the main things I’ve come to care about.

First, something I call “the lie of the literal.” Art is a language for imagining different futures, experiencing the past and the present from other angles, and learning to live. I did a play and video with

refugees in Toronto in the late 1980s called *Are the Birds in Canada the Same?* The participants were from a number of countries: all artists, all displaced, all survivors of violence. Most participants found it a very valuable experience — but one man did not. He played himself in the play we developed — a play I wrote based on the discussions and improvisations carried out — and he found himself plagued by nightmares and, essentially, re-traumatized by the experience. We don't like to talk about this kind of thing,

// I am suggesting that if the overly symbolic is the evasive, the overly literal is the lie, //

about the mistakes. What happened during this project prompted me to ask a number of questions. When I learned more about trauma and how it operates — the importance of working through trauma, not recycling it melancholically — I realized that the structure of our process had not allowed this man a chance to work through but only to repeat. This is slippery stuff and there are no formulas, but this experience led me to coin the phrase “the lie of the literal.” Here is a short paragraph from an essay I've written about this:

I am proposing an alternate approach to popular theatre practices (particularly in respect to how such practices engage and represent personal narratives) that speaks a story not as a fixed, knowable, finite thing, but as an open one that changes and carries with it the possibility of reformings and retellings. “Risky stories,” stories of emergency and violation, need to be constructed in such a way that the subtleties of damage, hope, and the “not nameable” can be performed. I am not suggesting a theatre which privileges the aesthetic over the material, the “look” of a theatre piece or story over the urgency of its conveyed meaning. I am suggesting that if the overly symbolic is the evasive, the overly literal is the lie. (“Performing Emergency” 184.)

Theatre is not real life. When we reproduce the real life story — in the name of authenticity, of material evidence, of telling the story “correctly” — we often reduce it. People who work with trauma survivors will tell you that the importance of telling a story and having it witnessed is crucial to living

with loss. But also critical is having a form outside oneself to “step into” that allows someone who has experienced trauma to “see it” outside of herself. So, when I work with people who are vulnerable, or survivors, I work with the imagination, the invention, the image to step into, not the “real story.”

My second point is related to the first, this idea of a too literal telling of a story that reduces its complexity — and, in a way, its dignity — and can run the risk of focusing more on pain than on agency. This time, though, I'm talking about what I call an aesthetic of injury in arts projects with survivors of violence. In another essay I wrote,

Some years ago I was invited to see a short play at a community college. Student actors and their director had developed a dramatic performance drawn from stories by Bosnian children who had lived through war and extreme violence. The piece opened with the actors lying on the floor doing breathing exercises and inviting the audience to call out thoughts evoked by the idea of land mines. Phrases such as “incomprehensible,” “stop it,” and “dead, dead” were grimly and vigorously taken up by groups of young performers and turned into tableaux of disaster, which segued into first-person narratives declaring stories of loss and dismemberment tempered with heroics. My disenchantment with this play is not at the expense of the student actors, who no doubt approached the project with sensitivity and the preliminary skills their level of training would allow. What disturbed me was a sense that the students were not present in the performance, were not noticing themselves in the picture, and, consequently, that we as audience members were neither asked nor able to implicate ourselves. Audience and actors together were looking *out* at some exoticized and deliberately tragic *other*. Even more discomfiting than the voyeurism I felt a participant in was the almost erotic quality of the manner in which the actors performed pain. Several audience members expressed being extremely moved by the whole thing. But what, I wondered, was our obligation as witnesses to this story, to this unacknowledged pleasure? Yes, the audience was moved, but by and towards what? (“Change” 122)

Playwright Daniel David Moses, in both his creative and critical writings, challenges the limits of tragic mimesis (or tragic forms of representing stories). As Moses puts it,

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 [. . .] To me it sounds as if this [white] guilt is the opposite thing: it seems that you don't want to heal, you want to keep the wound. In romanticism you're dancing around a wound. You have these great desires, these great idealistic possibilities, and then they're cut down and things end in death and it's very sad and beautiful. I've seen the attraction of it [. . .] but it strikes me as really sick. (Cited in Appleford, 22).

Moses is talking about contemporary mainstream theatre, but his comments apply to what I consider an aesthetic of injury within theatre for social change in English Canada. I suggest that a preoccupation with the experience of loss and a privileging of trauma as a mode of knowledge — both in popular theatre practice and in witnessing and trauma literature — provides an essential yet limiting framework which fixes testimony within a discourse of loss and the tragic, and often presumes testifying to be a monologue not a dialogue. I am beginning to suspect that theatre can offer something here to trauma theory. After all, the interpretation of the act of survival is an act of representation. Which notions of mimesis, of translation, of performance, inform how we live and represent surviving? Can such representations be more than the burden of loss as an absent presence?

The last postcard illustrates a point about the relationship between politics and art. In England in 1958, drama critic Kenneth Tynan accused Romanian absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco of separating art from the world, and of leading audiences up a blind alley with an “escape from realism” that led nowhere except to “art as a world of its own, answerable to none but its own laws.” Ionesco responded by saying that ideological art is inferior to the doctrine it claims to demonstrate, and that if anything needs demystifying it is our ideologies. He says Tynan is making a false distinction between realism and non-realism and is talking in fact about “only one plane of reality, the ‘social plane,’ which seems to me to be the most external, in other words, the most superficial.” The absence of ideology, Ionesco says, “does not mean the absence of ideas: on the contrary, it fertilizes them.”

Ionesco is suggesting, I think, that bad art is bad politics. And that distinctions in style — realism is “real life and serious,” the absurd or comedic is “frivolous” — are false dichotomies. I want to suggest the same

about the ways in which we classify art, in particular “community arts.” Right now I am writing the libretto (with composer Juliet Palmer) for an opera about the atom bomb. This project involves research on every level: the professional arts world; the people of Deline, North West Territories (where uranium was mined); the activists in Port Hope Ontario (where it was refined); researchers in New Mexico (where the Manhattan Project tested the bomb); Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. This project is about art, and politics, and history, and communities. It is related to a poetry workshop I do with Ruth Howard at Davenport Perth Community Centre and to the oral histories my students at Queen’s University perform with World War II Veterans. It’s a strange thing we do in the Western world, separating art from life and forcing it into categories. Not everybody does it this way.

I am going to wind up with some of the things I love about collaborative arts projects, and some of the things I hate. I love how excited an old man, Henry, gets when he writes a poem and then listens to the potent silence when he reads it aloud to a group of strangers at a workshop: the hush that falls over the group, the murmurs. He thinks, “I did that, I made them feel that.” I love when people who have been fighting about how to keep their children safe in their neighbourhood sew together over a community-centre table and find out they all love the colour red. And when a group of people who all love the colour red sew together over a community-centre table and find out they can join a coalition trying to keep their children safe. And they join, and they bring their strong red banner. I love that.

I hate when I am at a political conference and it is going on all day, and at the break one of the organizers asks me, “Can you do some theatre for an icebreaker, so we can all relax a bit.” Theatre as an ice breaker. I hate that. Or when I get a call from a community centre asking me to put some kind of play together about International Women’s Day, and then they give me a list of issues that the play needs to “address.” I hate that. And when International Women’s Day is two weeks away and the person on the phone tells me to “just make sure they have fun” — I hate that even more.

Am I against fun? Am I against issues? Hardly. So what’s the problem? The problem is that throwing an exercise or a play together on the fly is an insult to everyone, but most of all an insult to the terrible beauty and staggering potential that art offers should we be willing to meet her on her

terms. The problem is that the world is a confusing and scary place, and we need every ounce of imagination we can muster together with the skills to put that imagination into form. This is as true for Henry writing his poem as it is for Margaret Atwood writing her next book.

I always remember some painter telling me in elementary school, “If you want to paint, learn to hold a brush. And then learn to look.” The problem is that “art” has become a dirty word. I understand why: we all know about elitism and the arts as a marketplace. But that is not what anyone in this room is trying to do. We have gotten so tangled in trying to *not* be elitist that we have thrown out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. The child lives. Her name is art. I want her to come back.

In my twenties, when I started Second Look Community Arts Resource in the early 1980s, I said theatre was a tool. I hate that too. The dictionary calls art “a human creative skill or its application.” This is what I think my job is: to work with people who haven’t chosen to make their lives about art but want art in their lives. To introduce skills, a language, another way to speak. Another way to look. That’s why I called the company Second Look. By the way, we called ourselves “facilitators” in Second Look, and I hate that too. We wanted to pretend we all knew the same things, which is ridiculous. We all knew the same, more or less, about life, but Henry didn’t know how to speak his poem to the back of an auditorium until someone showed him how to open his throat. If you are an artist and someone in a group hires you to show them how to use a paintbrush, then for god’s sake show them. If you don’t, you are the one making art this big mystery, this special, elitist thing. Hiding our skills as artists is paternalistic and really a way to make ourselves special.

We also did a great deal of collective creation in Second Look, and I want to say a word about that. Collective creation is a misnomer. Creating collaboratively is about people sharing and shaping the details of their dreams, their accidents, their longings. This brings debate and friction and excitement and, perhaps, discovery. And it’s only good — rewarding, challenging, questioning — when it’s hard work, even if that hard work only lasts thirty minutes. You don’t get substance by hauling words and images out of people crudely and quickly, and you don’t get it by telling artists to follow your ideas about what issue is currently relevant. Trust them, trust the artists and the people, let them dig deeply and play with their world,

and they will surprise you and themselves. That’s their job.

Writer Jeanette Winterson says, [A]rt has deep and difficult eyes [...] art is a foreign city, and we deceive ourselves when we think it is familiar. No one is surprised that a foreign city follows its own customs and speaks its own language. Only a boor would ignore both and blame his defaulting on the place. Every day this happens to the artist and to art. (4)

Learn to hold a brush. Let someone teach you. Teach someone. Learn to look differently. Art is a language. Respect it. However little or much you engage in it, do it fully. And give painters and sculptors and musicians and writers and designers and actors and all these people who devote their lives to a craft the respect you would give an athlete, or a physician, or a teacher, or a builder: any serious worker who has spent time and energy and heart doing this thing in the world. Learn its language, just a little. It will give back to you tenfold. ■

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Julie Salverson is a playwright and community artist. She teaches at Queen’s University, and has published articles on witnessing, ethics and performance in *Theatre*, *Theatre Topics*, *Canadian Theatre Review* and *Theatre Research in Canada*, together with articles and plays in edited books. Much of her theatre practice has involved work with survivors of state violence. She is currently writing the libretto for an opera (with composer Juliet Palmer) for Tapestry New Opera Works about Canada’s relationship to the atomic bomb. She is working with Peter Van Wyck of Concordia University on a research project about “The Highway of the Atom,” the path of uranium from northern Canada to Hiroshima.

Repetition, Reverence, and Ritual:

Kabuki's Three R's

by James Forsythe

My first exposure to this unique form of dance-drama and spectacle both captivated and challenged me. Initially, the traditional art form of Kabuki appeared to be the textbook definition of Brook's "deadly" theatre. How can there be any artistic freedom in an art form based on re-creation? What is the effect of imitating another performer, especially when the choreography of the role is set? Yet this four-hundred-year-old methodology contains many lessons for a Western theatre that increasingly lacks purpose for audience and actor.

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In the winter of 2003-2004, at the invitation of Professor Julie Iezzi, I travelled to the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Asian Theatre Department to participate in the training and rehearsals for the Kabuki play *Nozaki Village*, translated and directed by Professor Iezzi. Each year, guest artists who are trained and work in the genre of the selected production augment the in-house faculty.

In November of 2003, three Kabuki theatre artists from the National Theatre of Japan came to UHM: Nakamura Gannosuke (the *Onnagata*, or actor of female roles), Toyazawa Tokijaku (the *Takemoto*, or Narrator/Musician), and Nakamura Jujiro (the *Tachiyaku*, or actor of male roles). In three short weeks, these professionals led the student company from audition, through the first reading, to a full-fledged stumble through with some of the cast off book. The scarcity of time was made more onerous by the added difficulties of working with an alien theatre

form and in a foreign language. The public performance would be in English but the initial training was all in Japanese.

The training and rehearsals were based on learning by rote, driven by continual repetition. The students learned the text as a musician would learn a piece by ear. Each section of the Japanese script was repeated with the master actors playing all the parts until the student actors could parrot the line-reading and movement. It was mind numbing. But repetitive or not, the work is revered by the Kabuki actors I observed. The power of their focus on the value of what they were doing transformed the students into disciplined actors by clearly establishing a challenging goal and providing the method by which success could be obtained.

Earle Ernst, the founder of the University of Hawaii's Asian Theatre Program, tells us, "Kabuki presents to the audience not the thing itself but the designed impression of the thing" (177). This principal is not just a work ethic, it is a way of seeing the world. If direction is primarily problem solving in order to find a way through the rehearsal process to performance, Gannosuke and Jujiro provided an unambiguous path. The female and young male hero roles were taught/directed by Gannosuke (the *Onnagata*), while Jujiro, the senior actor of the pair, handled the rest. To maximize the limited amount of contact time with the master teachers, the two of them read each character's lines into a tape recorder and videotaped the blocking. Each moment of every role was presented and then copied by the student. The precision of the smallest amount of business was extraordinary. It was exact: timed and choreographed to the second. This was accepted as the Kabuki way and no one in the cast questioned it.

This group of actors had a fervent facility for hard work and rose to the challenge of learning based on repetition, listening, and watching specific examples. Professor Iezzi described this phenomenon as the power of the exotic in teaching:

There is a psychological thing about working with an actual Kabuki actor for a limited amount of time that allows the students to really focus and



give to that process. Not that they don't work hard normally, but there is something that happens with the sense that they are not going to ever be able to do this again.

Casting was colour-blind, with talent and physical appropriateness to the role being the central criteria. There was also some gender-blind casting due to the preponderance of talented women in this, as in most, academic theatre departments. It would have been extremely interesting to see at least some of the male actors cope with the test of playing the *onnagata* roles. Unfortunately, the cross-gender casting only went one way. While this compromise may have arisen out of expedience, it may also be an admission that in one production it is simply impossible for a Western male actor to perform as an *onnagata*. "Pants" roles for women are a Western construct and therefore more acceptable, though often less than satisfying. Kabuki female roles are not simply women; they are the designed impression of feudal Japanese feminine power distilled and then presented by men.

The only native-born Japanese actor in the cast, Lei Sadakari, a graduate of the



University of Pittsburgh, played Osome, the female lead. When asked about acting by imitation, she said,

Right now, I am desperately trying to memorize all the things I have been given. For me the movement comes first. In a Western play, the actors would be looking into each other's eyes. In Kabuki, I don't even look at my boyfriend as I must cry over him.

This is the dissonance between naturalistic acting and Kabuki performance. Gannosuke endeavoured to instill a new, more physically focussed way of performing during rehearsals. He showed the actor again

how to walk, knock on a gate, and bow in the Kabuki way. The dramatic tension and the emotional resonance of the situation arose out of the technique being drilled into the students. The master teachers knew this would happen because of their belief in the quality of their art form. The students remained open to the power of this faith — at first because they were overwhelmed, and then increasingly because they saw for themselves that the structure was supporting them.



// Western theatre training could learn much from Kabuki's use of the physical body of the actor. //

Along with repetition and reverence, ritual also transformed the rehearsal hall. Prior to the scheduled start time, actors would prepare by attiring themselves in kimonos and then kneeling, waiting patiently for the master. Once the masters entered, the actors bowed and greeted them in unison. After a greeting and bow in response, work commenced. A similar ritual ended rehearsal. Even the folding of a kimono to reduce it to the size of a handkerchief for storage required careful attention and helped create a singular atmosphere in the studio. Form and respect facilitated the speed and clarity of rehearsals. Every question from actors to director was prefaced by the salutation, "Sensei" (Master). The form of respect led to actual respect. The highly structured exterior seemed to free the students to intensify their faithfulness to the character's reality. The actor's goal is to create by re-creating, which gives the young actor a system of support and security that allows creativity to evolve



in the depth of commitment to the theatrical reality of the moment. Structure and respect are not dirty words and artistic freedom is never absolute. One cast member, Jenny Frazer-Lake, reflecting on a previous Asian theatre experience, spoke to the issue of individuality within this reverence for form:

If you watch any of these forms — Kabuki, Kyogen, or Jingju — every production is essentially the same, it has the same movement and blocking. They are the same but they are all vastly different because of what the actors bring to it. So it is essentially just a framework. As I started looking at it, I realized that is something powerful to give your actors: a framework. In Western theatre, we tend to say, "Go for it!" and so it can get very convoluted. When you give them a structure, you allow them a place to start.

After the Christmas break, rehearsals resumed with the immediate goal of introducing Professor Iezzi's freshly translated English words to replace the original text. Sections were repeated in Japanese to recall rhythm and pitch, and then the English text was inserted. It is the traditional intent of the Asian Theatre Department to present Kabuki as it would be seen in the professional theatre in Japan. The vocal patterns, syllable count, pitch, and tones of the Japanese words are repeated, substituting one language for another whether or not the cultural identifying codes of class and behaviour translate. The samurai class, for example, represented in this play by the male romantic lead, suffered a loss of perceived status from the point of view of its Western audience, since the actor had to speak in a contrived manner — one often similar to the way in which childless adults speak to children. The characters that were able to retain a closer relationship with usual Western speech patterns appeared to be more intelligent and therefore of higher status regardless of the original intent. James R. Brandon, Asian Theatre Professor Emeritus, referring to an earlier production, defended this convention of refusing to adapt the production even to maintain the original sense:



// The West has abandoned perfection and replaced it with ego. The concepts of respect and reverence receive short shrift, even derision, in our worship of artistic freedom and the glorification of the new. //

I was following the principal of not second-guessing the tradition. In this production, for which strong *kata* exist, where do you stop if you begin to make changes? If this change is reasonable, aren't there other places I might also alter the *kata* for better audience understanding? (170)

There were however significant alterations to the performance codes: witness the presence of women in the cast. While immersion in an alien art form has inherent benefits, I wondered at the lack of focus on the audience perceptions. The conundrum of presenting Asian theatre to a Western audience is a central issue for productions like *Nozaki Village*: if you use Kabuki sets, props, costumes, and respect the movement traditions then must you also respect the vocal conventions? Texts in translation must also be adaptations. Once you use a modern idiom such as “Cut the crap!” (*Nozaki Village* Act 2), it sounds odd to hear actors making pitch choices that have nothing to do with the sense of the line. What is the point of tradition if it denies the efficacy of the dramatic impact of the performance?

Any training that increases the vocabulary of choice is beneficial. The relative size of the Kabuki performance provides a literal stretch for the actor normally bound by the confines of realism. There is also the broad-

er benefit of this cultural exchange that goes on every year at UHM: exposing American students in an intensive way to the life of Asia. Theatre scholarship is important, but you must practice an art form to learn a culture.

This cross-pollination takes place within the context of the larger community of Hawaii. There is a striking Asian influence on every aspect of life, particularly in Honolulu, which may explain the prominence of the Asian Theatre program at UHM. People who live in Hawaii (to differentiate from “native” Hawaiians) are aware of their distinct society, but it is so all-pervasive as to have become subliminal. Dr. Roger Long, associate dean of the College of Arts and Humanities at UHM, illustrated this dichotomy by remembering the comments of a former student:

We had a number of young Japanese-American actors; one of them went to New York and did fairly well and then went to Los Angeles. I did a panel at the ATHE (Association of Theatre in Higher Education) Conference; he was on the panel and it was on Asian-Americans working in professional theatre. He commented, “I didn't know I was Asian until I came to New York [. . .] [I]n Hawaii it didn't make any difference: if you could do the role you did the role if you were African-American or Japanese or Chinese.

I didn't realize until I got to New York how race bound the profession is.”

This Asian influence also speaks to the ethics of cultural appropriation. Is this appropriation of a nation's art for selfish purposes? Professor Iezzi declared it a non-issue: We have master teachers coming from China, Japan, and Southeast Asia and they are coming to teach, so it is not as if we are saying as a faculty that we have it all. We use the master teachers to teach *that* art and convey *that* culture. The direct contact is very important. If they didn't think it was legitimate, they wouldn't come. Ballet is international. Opera is international. Why can't you do English *Jingju?* (Chinese opera) The artists themselves from those respective countries have no issues with it so why should we?

The faculty is evangelical on the *raison d'être* of the guest artist program within the Asian Theatre Department. Kirsten Pauka, Randai theatre specialist, states,

The students really appreciate this depth of training and it really opens their eyes to new levels of appreciation of other genres and cultures, and by definition other ethnicities. They expand their repertoire of styles, they expand their voice, what their body can possibly do — and they do what

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“The Super-Arab” Is out of the Cave

by Rawi Hage

But at last his heart turned — and one morning he rose with the dawn, stepped before the sun, and spoke to it.

—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche

In their film *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), Elias Suleiman and Jayce Salloum, two Arab artists, created a compilation of stereotypical and pejorative images of Arabs in the American media. Tracing from the exotic Arabia in the Hollywood film industry to the depiction of violent Arabs in cartoons, they presented a disturbing account of the conception of Arabs in the American collective unconscious. This historical Western depiction of Arabs is not foreign to the Arab intellect, nor to the Arab street. Arabs, when talking about politics in their salons or their cafés, often shake their heads and utter, all in agreement, *Al soura dodina* (the image is against us).

This frustration and awareness has led a new generation of Arabs to create and reconstruct their own image. Hence the birth of more sophisticated media channels like Al-

Arabs, when talking about politics in their salons or their cafés, often shake their heads and utter, all in agreement, *Al soura dodina* (the image is against us).

Jazeera, filled with sensational coverage surpassing CNN and its new wave of “embedded journalists.” All this is accompanied by the emergence of young Arab artists, filmmakers, and cultural organizers in a counter-representation crusade to reclaim the Arabs’ image. In 2003, there were more than ten film festivals organized by Arab students or institutions, from California to Detroit to Montreal. More independent filmmakers and video artists are emerging from within the Arab community; more grassroots solidarity festivals and events are being organized in collaboration with other ethnic communities; and more women filmmakers and video artists than ever before are behind the camera. To name a few: Mona Hatoum, Nesrine

Khodr, Danielle Arbid, and Annemarie Jacir.

Arab youth are securing their own space in the cultural scene, knowing well that a large part of the new oppressive neo-colonial and neo-conservative policies, military invasions, and confiscation of resources and land have an important root in the cultural arena, and, more specifically, in the visual. Armed with relatively cheap media, like video cameras and computers, this new “Super-Arab” is out of the cave, and is aware of the value of his or her dark eyes — under thick, curved, sword-like eyebrows — penetrating the viewfinder.

In a 2004 concert benefit for the International Solidarity Movement in Montreal at Sala Rosa, an Iraqi/ Canadian rap group, Euphrates, started their performance with the song *Western Civilization is Domination*. In her video *Like Twenty Impossibilities* — a piece shot in Palestine and released in 2003 — Palestinian cinematographer/video maker Annemarie Jacir opens with a scene of a film crew deciding to take an alternative road to avoid an Israeli check point. Three Israeli soldiers stop the crew. When the sound technician is held — in a scene that blurs the line between fiction and documentary — the film becomes a silent one in which one sees the American/Palestinian director fearlessly negotiating with the soldiers for the release of the two Arab crew members. Against the backdrop of this forced silence, the visual still clearly conveys the message of the film. In Annemarie’s film, the visual triumphs over sound, a breakthrough move for the Arabic culture that so often values the lyrical (songs and poetry) over the visual.

This silencing phenomenon is certainly not limited to the Israeli occupying army. The young Super-Arab knows and understands this mechanism of distortion — dismissal and silencing — that the West has so

often used to construct its own image of the Arab world. This sophisticated mechanism of misrepresentation relies on an advanced visual technology and biased ideologies, such as balanced coverage, the five-minute Uncle Tom expert on the Arab world, the dissect and hide tactic, targeted editing, and the exotic subliminal quick image coupled with wailing menacing sounds. All the above have pushed the new Super-Arabs into alternative spaces, forcing them to project a different image from their luminous caves.

From beneath the dominant corporate and Zionist media, a loud young Super-Arab is shaking the underworld. But when these Super-Arabs have emerged from the cave on a journey of overcoming, the old treacherous, silencing mechanism of power has taken a more direct and open approach to stifling them. One has only to mention a few incidents in our “multi-culturally tolerant” Canadian landscape to expose this oppressive counter-movement.

After September 11, the Museum of Civilization, under the presidency of Mr. Victor Rabinovitch, decided to postpone the opening of the show entitled *The Lands Within Me*. This exhibit was an expression of Arab-Canadian artists that was due to open on October 18, 2001. After an intensive Internet campaign, which was conducted by a few participant artists, some 650 emails in 48 hours were sent in protest to the museum on this issue. The media caught on to the subject, and on September 26 the Prime Minister rose in the House of Commons to denounce the postponement of the exhibit. The exhibition was reinstalled to its original opening date. In what seemed a retaliatory or punitive move, due perhaps to the successful campaign to reopen the show, Mr. Rabinovitch made another decision offensive to the Arabic community: he terminated the contract of the show’s curator, Dr. Aïda Kaouk.

Mr. Rabinovitch was also instrumental in the decision to close the Southwest Asia Department at the museum. Both decisions were inflammatory, incomprehensible, and groundless. Ms. Kaouk’s commitment to the exhibit had been exemplary. Her work led to a successful show that was attended by more than 400 thousand visitors. Her ten-year record with the museum is another indication of her commitment and ability to organize and deliver. Furthermore, Ms. Kaouk was still needed to finish the production of the publication for the exhibition, as well as to speak at the exhibition itself — visitors were to be denied her expertise. Her presence also would have been vital in following up on the wide inter-

national interest shown for the exhibit: to promote invitations for outside tours.

Mr. Rabinovitch’s decisions, then, were highly questionable: he targeted the only female worker from an Arab and ethnic background; he repeatedly hindered the expression of the Southwest Asian community in an extension of an unhealthy nationwide atmosphere of racism, detentions, and political aggression that our community has been submitted to since September 11; and he closed the Southwest Asian Department while all other departments, such as Southeast Asian or Southwest European, have been exempt from closure. By denying Southwest Asian artists a forum and a space to present their work at the museum for future projects and events, Mr. Rabinovitch and the museum’s policies were clearly targeting this community.

Artists Against the Occupation, a show by a collective of Canadian and international

The young Super-Arab knows and understands this mechanism of distortion — dismissal and silencing — that the West has so often used to construct its own image of the Arab world.

artists that took place at the MAI center in Montreal from September 25 to November 1, 2003, was denounced by a few Jewish organizations even before the opening. It was deemed anti-Israeli — a change from the usual anti-Semitic label applied to any voice critical of Israel’s human rights violations. The organizations proceeded to make a series of protesting phone calls to the Canada Council for the Arts and other sponsors of the show.

Of course I am not insinuating that all cultural events that deal with Arabs are being censored. *Au contraire*, there is a new curiosity about Arab culture and, if anything, this interest is flourishing and being widely funded in the West. The issue here is not that Arab cultural events are widely fought; my comment is about the type of event that is selected to be presented or funded, versus those that are fought. Any cultural event that goes beyond a balanced, polite, folkloric, and apolitical message is labeled anti-Semitic and unbalanced, or is completely ignored by the media. There is a discrepancy between what Arabs really want to express and what they are allowed or encouraged to present.

In her speech at the opening of *The Lands*

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Detention by Rawaf Hage

ALI & ALI

A few Reflections after the Fact
by Guillermo Verdecchia Photos by Bo Huang

Back in April, Steve Bell drew a cartoon for the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper entitled “Of Course There Will be a Role for the UN,” referring to the (then) much vaunted involvement of the United Nations in the mess that was (and is) Iraq. The cartoon (especially effective in full colour) shows a shit-splattered water closet. In the far corner, up to his chin in shit and wearing a fierce grimace (or is it a grin?), is a pointy-headed lap dog who looks remarkably like Tony Blair. In the darker, foreground corner, a rat (Saddam Hussein) gives a thumbs-up sign. In the centre, looking startled, as if someone had opened the door on him while he was doing his business, on a cracked and broken toilet, sits George Bush (he always depicts Bush as an exceptionally unintelligent simian) reaching for the sky blue toilet paper, which is decorated with the UN logo.

That I like this cartoon enormously may be taken, by some, as a sign of my arrested development. It was in this spirit, if not actual state, of arrested development that I worked, with my good friends and col-

leagues Camyar Chai and Marcus Youssef, on *The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil*, a play we subtitled a divertimento for warlords.

You’ve heard the rumours: fresh from their sold out tour of East Monrovia and the jungle encampments of Congolese Bauxite smugglers on their way to the unacknowledged detention centres of Axerbaijan ... They’re here, they’re live, and they’ve got a Korean! Are you ready Mogadishu? Butt out your cigars, and wipe the buckets of sweat from your really black, black brows, put your stumps and prostheses together and give a Great Big Clash of Civilizations Welcome to Ali and Ali!

Fed up with the highly managed and ultimately meaningless political discourse with which the invasion of Iraq was almost ubiquitously met — think of all those reasonable CBC voices, the newspaper columnists and pundits, the White House press conferences, and so on — we felt the need to call out as simply and forcefully as possible, This is Fucked! In response to the carefully con-

trolled speech of almost all “analysts” and experts, we wanted to say the wrong thing, as frequently, as loudly, and as variedly as we possibly could. We wanted to offend and provoke. (And in doing so implicitly ask which is the greater offence: this off-colour joke about Semi-Colin Powell or, say, Semi-Colin’s mendacious performance at the UN and its consequences?) Like other satirists, we wanted to mock, reject, subvert, and resist (a murderous) idealism by insisting on the corporeal, the crude, the rude. We wanted to meet the obscenity of Bush and Blair’s wars with some second-order obscenity of our own. For example, in one particularly delightful moment — further evidence of arrested development? — US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is presented vigorously jerking off and crying out, as he’s coming, “Who’s in power now, Hillary?” Like other dissenting artists, we wanted to laugh to keep ourselves from crying.

More important than resisting (or satirizing) the lies and obfuscations of the American administration and its allies was the need to combat the easy earnestness with

Marcus Youssef & Camyar Chai as Ali and Ali

“We felt the need to call out
as simply and forcefully as possible,
This is Fucked!”



which mainstream discourse in Canada addresses the problems and crises of the geopolitical Other. One of the modes this earnestness takes is to re-present the people of the Majority World as de-historicized victims in need of our help. Marcus and Camyar insisted that we had to dispel the odour of victimization that especially attends the peoples of the Middle East. Stateless and impoverished they may be, yet Ali and Ali are anything but helpless victims without agency. They are, rather, restless and relentless improvisers: survivors, who speak the truth in the most unlikely and revealing contexts.

ALI HAKIM:

Stop. That's enough, all this bullshit. There's no fire department in Agraba. Provisional Authority disbanded Fire Department. For being part of old regime. Only fire department I will give money to is the one making fire in occupiers' tanks.

ALI ABABWA: (laughs exaggeratedly) Oh. Ali Hakim is having the irony. My friends, there is great need for modern fire department in Agraba today, to put out all the explosions. If you buy Ali and Ali pillowcase, we give you Agraba City Fire Department decal for proud display in Hummer. Come on.

ALI HAKIM:

Cheap bastards. You Canadians — you can't buy me a slice of pizza? How much did you make selling weapons to Americans, huh? Who armed the fundamentalists!

ALI ABABWA:

You mean the Zionists? Cause they're still arming the Zionists.

ALI HAKIM:

No, I mean the Other Fundamentalists! (he speaks in Agrabian) Our fundamentalists!

ALI ABABWA:

Ali Hakim. They do not speak your language.

ALI HAKIM:

My language? (pause)

ALI HAKIM turns to the audience.

ALI HAKIM:

They have done this to us. Long live the Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Agraba. And fuck you!

ALI ABABWA:

Ali Hakim. No no no. TIM!

ALI HAKIM:

Fuck all you in your peaceful west. Oh sure, you think I am violent and disrespectful huh. Why don't I embrace your fucking democracy? I wonder?! One hundred years ago you called it civilization, and you're still shoving it down our throats!

TIM runs on and tranquilizes ALI HAKIM with a needle in the neck. ALI HAKIM instantly collapses. TIM drags him off to a corner and revives him.

ALI ABABWA:

My friends, please. Ali Hakim is very — aroused? He has much on his serving dish, many worries, responsibilities. But let us not let that trouble us now. Hey! Please, good peoples, take your time choosing what is right for you and your lifestyle. You may at any time during the show signal your interest in buying some-

thing simply by calling out, "Hey, I'd like to buy that pillowcase," or these shirts that we are wearing or that life-like civet cat featured in *Grasshopper White Eyes Dreams of Home*. Whatever you desire. We are — due to circumstances beyond our control — practicing neo-liberals, and will sell pretty much anything for a price.

Naturally, their truth telling — and their anarchic manner — brings Ali and Ali into conflict with authority. The theatre manager interrupts their cabaret-style entertainment to insist that they perform the (earnest) ethnic family drama agreed upon in their contract. The theatre manager (obviously) stands for the generally unspoken assumptions that underlie professional theatrical practice in Canada.

Look, this is not the place, and I'm sure you (*audience*) agree with me, NAE the place for your local, petty, feudal grievances, yer decontextualized finger pointing. The theatre is where we explore the timeless verities of the human condition.

Incidentally, not only our invented manager objected to Ali and Ali. The play's style, language, and tone also offended extra-textual authorities: i.e., some "real" reviewers took exception to our little offering. On the other hand, our audiences of students, activists, raging grannies, and Others of all description in Edmonton, Vancouver, Montreal, and even Toronto, seemed to approve.

In performing the ethnic family drama(s) (not one, not two, but *three*: *Grasshopper White Eyes Dreams of Home*, *A Day in the Life of Ivan Scarberia*, and *Johnny Two Feathers Runs With Pizza Box*), Ali and Ali (inadvertently?) demolish the earnestness (and banality) that passes for much contemporary culturally diverse playwrighting. One of the traditional functions of satire has been to challenge or re-invigorate moribund forms, and these scenes allowed us to make the point that the family drama as a genre for plays about identity has come to the end of its useful life.

More than anything else though, what we wanted to do (I think) with Ali and Ali — through their willingness to transgress and to speak the truth in the bluntest and freshest and, consequently, funniest way (like that Steve Bell cartoon I like so much), through the sheer energy of their performance — was to offer an antidote to the timidity we see in so much of our culture. We had no illusions that our play would or could create change on a material level;

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RUMSELD, SHARON, BIN LADEN FRIENDS IN ENMITY

WE ARE SWORN ENEMIES
BUT FRIENDS IN ACTION
SENDING MESSENGERS OF DEATH
AND OF DESTRUCTION

WE ARE UNITED
IN IMAGINING WE HAVE BEEN WRONGED
TO JUSTIFY OUR DERANGED BEHAVIOUR
AGAINST HUMANITY
HIDING BEHIND
A CLOAK OF IDEOLOGY
IN THE NAME OF FIGHTING EVIL
NOT CARING IF IT IS RIGHT
FOR OUR EGOS ARE IN FULL FLIGHT

WHO WILL BE MAHADEVA
A SAVIOUR, A SUPREME BEING
WHO STOPPED GODDESS KALI IN HER TRACKS
SHE, IN SLAYING THE DEMONS
LOST HER SENSES
AND LAID THE WORLD BARE

FOR THESE DESTRUCTORS OF HUMANITY
WE PRAY FOR A MAHADEVA TO RISE
IS IT THE TURN OF A WOMAN
A GODDESS IN DISGUISE
TO MAKE THEM UNDERSTAND
YOU CANNOT BUILD A NATION ONLY ON BLOOD
YOUR ANGERS ARE DROWNING HUMANITY
LIKE A RIVER IN FLOOD

Kabuki continued from page 9

they never thought they could do. They don't have to work in Kabuki, for example, to use some of the vocal techniques, the larger-than-life acting styles, the movement or martial arts, etc. If done properly, it can enhance their art and professionalism if they become performers; and it enhances the depth of their understanding if they become teachers and scholars.

Western theatre training could learn much from Kabuki's use of the physical body of the actor: the codified representations of emotion and the more basic archetypal images of the human condition that are an important component of Kabuki, if not all Asian or non-text centred theatre. But while the form or *kata* of Kabuki provides a structure, one might ask: Could not *any* structure respected by all of the stakeholders in a production provide the same benefit? Western theatre schools all provide structured technical training in the skill sets needed by actors: such as Tai Chi, dance, and fencing. Kabuki's use of the physical and visual elements of performance creates its impact and appeal, but Western entertainment from opera to professional wrestling does the same. The difference is that Kabuki actors have a respect for the form, the material, and their work that is profound. The traditional nature of an art form that by definition has not changed in four hundred years dictates the goal, in both training and performance, of achieving the perfection of a known standard. The West has abandoned perfection and replaced it with ego. The concepts of respect and reverence receive short shrift, even derision, in our worship of artistic freedom and the glorification of the new. My recent experience with the Kabuki actors at UHM suggests that students benefit from a firm sense of structure. It enables them to take the risks necessary to surprise themselves. The *Nozaki Village* project is an example of a classic art form transcending its own values.

The master teachers returned to Hawaii in March of 2004 to assist with makeup and costume techniques. *Nozaki Village* played to sell-out houses at the Kennedy Theatre on the Manoa campus of the University of Hawaii in April of 2004. The production was nominated for a Po'okela, the local (Hawaii) theatre awards, in the categories of best play and best performance by an actress. ■

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www.hawaii.edu/theatre

James Forsythe is an associate professor and head of the Drama Program at Brandon University. He wishes to acknowledge the support of Professor Iezzi, the students and faculty of the Asian Theatre Department of UHM, the Brandon University Research Council, and the Manitoba Arts Council.



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within Me. Sheila Copps, then Canadian Minister of Culture, ended her speech with a *Shalom, Salaam*. This, while greeting a widely Arab audience, as if an exhibit that has its roots in the Arabic culture has to be excused by an apologetic Hebrew word. She thus reduced one of the greatest civilizations and cultures in history to a dialectic identity that cannot stand on its own without being balanced by and chained to the other. ■

Rawi Hage is a visual artist, writer and curator. Born in Beirut, Lebanon, he now lives in Montréal.

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however, if Ali and Ali vindicated the feelings of — or simply amused — people doing some real work *vis a vis* the war (like the Quakers we met in Edmonton who were hosting a deserter from the US army), that was sufficient. ■

Guillermo Verdecchia is a multi-award winning playwright, director, and actor. Co-author of *Ali and Ali*, he directed it and Rahul Varma's *Bhopal* for Cahoots Theatre Projects last season. This fall he will direct *Romeo and Juliet* for Young People's Theatre in Toronto.

You can reach him at: guillermov@sympatico.ca

InBox

In his editorial on *The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the Axes of Evil* (alt.theatre, April 2004), Edward Little writes that "many of those who failed to take the show seriously ... espoused the kind of binary analysis characterized by the irrational nationalist rhetoric of Bush's 'you are either with us or against us.'" I would go further. I would say they're just like Hitler, because, you know, you're either with Bush or you're not, or, as Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver liked to say, "You're either part of the solution or part of the problem."

Arthur Milner

Arthur Milner is a playwright and director, and a former artistic director, of Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company. His plays include *Masada*, about the history of Zionism, and, most recently, *Joan Henry, A Musical* (written with Allen Cole and Estelle Shook), and produced in 2003 by the Caravan Farm Theatre in Armstrong, British Columbia.

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