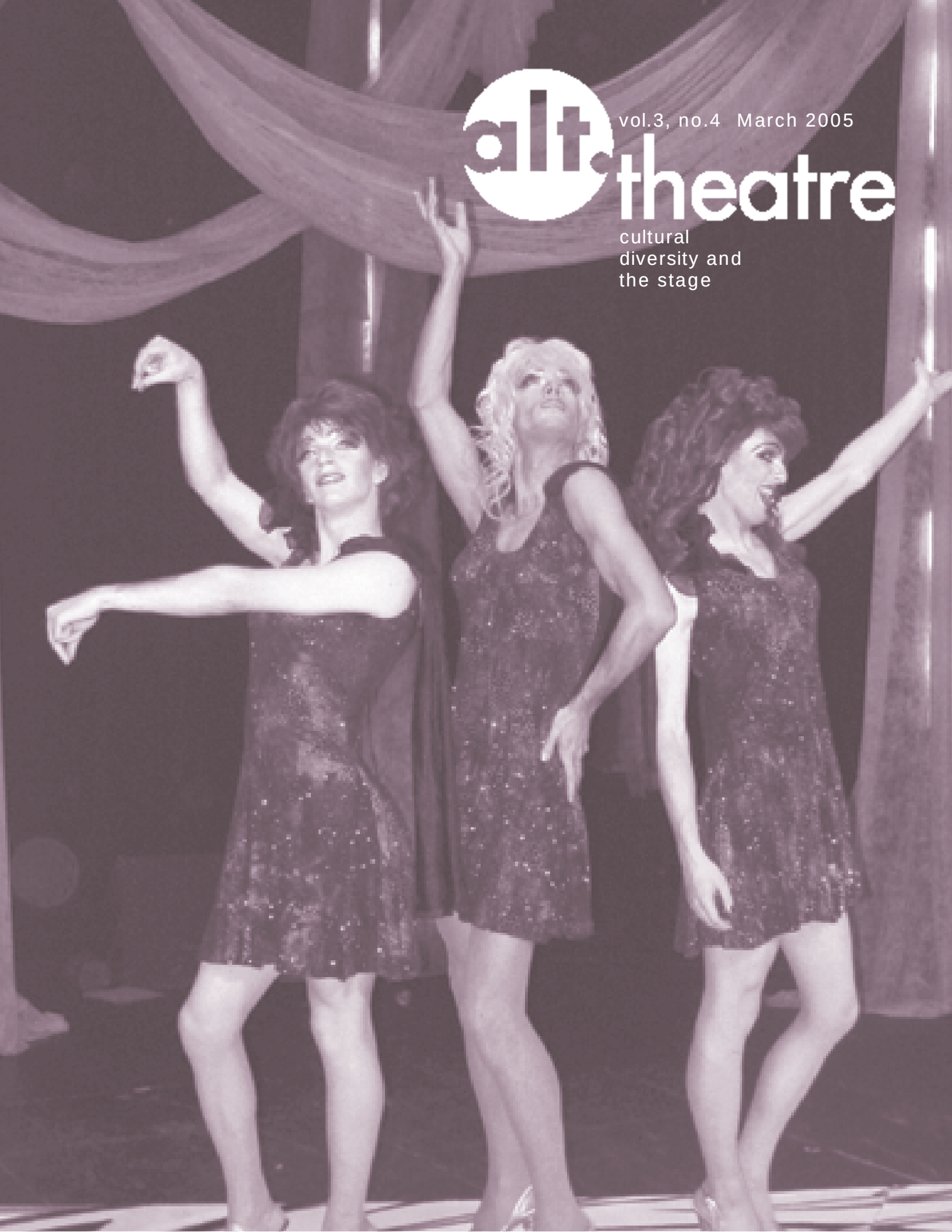

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alt theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

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Cover Photo: Jay Whitehead, David Barrus and Neil James strike a pose in a scene from *Drag Queens on Trial*. Photo by Courtney Thomas

Art and Social Action

By Edward Little

" . . . the objective of our work here is to learn how to go on not understanding each other together forever. Communication is not about understanding, it is about meaning."

Joseph Schaeffer

For some time now, the lived experience of cultural and social diversity within liberal democracies has been challenging all of us to go beyond limited public affirmations of unified, picturesque, and insular visions of community—those represented through exotic costume, food, and the occasional voyeuristic engagement with religious festivals and celebrations. To go beyond we need a public discourse that admits not only the contributions but the complexity, contradictions, and challenges of diversity. This requires a forum that permits us to ask each other difficult questions about values and beliefs; to examine rather than avoid conflicts; and above all, to commit to the ongoing development of effective communication across difference. There can be no real debate without disclosure, however, and while live theatre is often disquieting, its concern with social relations within a dialogic context provides a place where we might attempt to examine vulnerability through exposure and approach compassion through empathy. The inclusion of artists and writers from diverse communities must obviously be a cornerstone of this larger public discourse. When theatre becomes controversial, however, as in the instances examined within the pages of this issue, particular attention is drawn to the role of art, aesthetics, and criticism to reveal new perspectives on beliefs, value systems, and intentions within the broader social contexts of human dignity, identity and representation, social justice, and structures of power. Of course, we must also consider the complicity of art and artists in the status quo, as well as the cultural and social politics that inform the criteria we use to assess the value, legitimacy, and accomplishments of any given work of art.

The writers in this issue are all concerned with art's role in furthering public discourse around diversity. They write about consciousness-raising and demystification, social justice and resistance, censorship and self-censorship. They also write of deep divisions and violent confrontations between artistic, religious, and conservative social values. Discord is not surprising given the historical role of art to engage in social critique. Yet, as the articles in this issue demonstrate, the challenges facing theatre today are complicated by the increasingly pluralistic nature of our rapidly shifting society. Community-engaged and intercultural approaches to theatre are addressing plurality in ways that stand to contribute significantly to the larger social discourse. This is a theatre that exists by reaching out to emerging artists and new audiences from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. It functions by creating theatrical forums where difficult questions might be examined and negotiated—about censorship; "unquestionable" beliefs and protectionism; categories of public and private; metaphor and appropriation; and inherited notions of beauty and utility. Drawing on various types of community-engaged, street, and popular theatre, this work often includes interdisciplinary collaborations, multiple perspectives, and various approaches to widespread public participation in many aspects of theatrical events.

Teesri Duniya Theatre describes this as "social marketing" — bringing together artists, community activists, and others concerned with issues of social justice and cultural diversity to work with us to create public forums, discussions, exhibits, displays, and outreach in connection with our projects and productions. Teesri's mandate also includes the creation of participatory theatre projects as well as explorations of form, genre, and social intervention, such as our Leaf in a Whirlwind project that will combine classical Indian dance, contemporary theatre, and narratives from women in conflict situations to address the experience of "women in war."

Collaborative projects such as the Downtown Eastside Community Play (discussed in this issue) depend heavily on reaching a high degree of consensus in order to ensure large-scale public participation. Concepts of *inclusivity* and *democratization* are applied to all aspects of projects to ensure that representation is a collectively negotiated balance of community affirmation and social intervention. Such projects regularly negotiate competing visions of society informed by tensions between literalist and metaphoric mindsets, as well as between individual and community rights and responsibilities.

These forms and approaches to theatre have much to contribute both to the larger social discourse and to contemporary performance theory's concern with communication, dialogic form, interdisciplinary arts, audience/performance relationships, and the very nature of performance itself. Yet this work remains largely "Off the Radar" — to borrow the title of the Canada Council's 2003-2004 "Initiatives in Critical Thinking" project. "Off the Radar" recognized the need to foster critical thinking as a prerequisite to increased public understanding of new or evolving arts practices. The time is ripe for theatre criticism to take seriously the implications of relationships between aesthetics and social action.

Statement by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti

PUBLISHED IN *THE GUARDIAN*, 13 JANUARY 2005

"I am proud to be a Sikh, and my play is both respectful to Sikhism and honest."

As a writer I lead a quiet life, so nothing could have prepared me for the furore and intense media interest of the past few weeks. I am still trying to process everything that's happened — my play, *Behzti*, has been cancelled; I've been physically threatened and verbally abused by people who don't know me; and my family has been harassed and I've had to leave my home.

I have chosen not to speak until now, but not because I have been frightened into silence. Dealing with the practical issues around my own safety and that of those close to me has been my priority.

Firstly, I have been deeply angered by the upset caused to my family, and I ask people to see sense and leave them alone.

I am very grateful for the overwhelming support I have received nationally and internationally from the artistic world, from fellow Sikhs and many others. At a time when the power of words is under the closest scrutiny, please know that your words have kept my spirit strong.

My play and the foreword to it are in the public domain, and I whole-heartedly stand by my work. I was very saddened by the decision to stop the play but accepted that the theatre had no alternative when people's safety could not be assured. Contrary to some reports, nothing in *Behzti* was ever altered as a result of pressure from anyone. As any drama practitioner knows, new writing evolves during rehearsal, and any changes made were simply part of the usual creative process between writer, director and actors. Nor, as has been suggested, did I ever veto any attempts to restage *Behzti*. And I will, when the time is right, discuss the play's future with relevant parties.

The closing of the play has triggered a series of timely and valuable discussions. However, there can never be any excuse for the demonisation of a religion or its followers. The Sikh heritage is one of valour and victory over adversity. Our ancestors were warriors with the finest minds who championed principles of equality and selflessness. I am proud to come from this remarkable people and do not fear the disdain of some, because I know my work is rooted in honesty and passion. I hope bridges can be built, but whether this prodigal daughter can ever return home remains to be seen.

Unfortunately the contents of *Behzti* seem to have been taken out of context by many. Surely it is only by reading or seeing the whole thing that anyone can usefully comment on the decisions made and on the play's merits or flaws?

I certainly did not write *Behzti* to offend. It is a sincere piece of work in which I wanted to talk about what is beneath the surface of triumph — all that is anonymous, despairing, human, inhumane and absurd — and to explore how human frailties can lead people into a prison of hypocrisy.

For a story to be truly universal, I think it is important to start with what is specific. Though the play is set in a gurdwara, its themes are not just about Sikhism, and I hope that a person of any faith, or indeed of no faith, could relate to its subject matter. I feel that the choice of setting was crucial and valid for the story I wanted to tell and, in my view, the production was respectful to Sikhism. It is only a shame that others have not had the chance to see it and judge for themselves.

Religion and art have collided for centuries, and will carry on doing battle long after my play and I are forgotten. The tension

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Behzti:

FREE SPEECH, SACRILEGE, AND SILENCING

by Helen Freshwater

The violent demonstrations that accompanied Bhatti's play and the Birmingham Rep's decision to cancel the production's run received an extraordinary level of coverage in the British media. For a few short days the play and the protestors were front-page news. Media commentators filled innumerable pages of newsprint and hours of airtime with reflection upon the issues raised by cultural diversity of modern Britain.

The intensity of this response is understandable. Both the play and the protests required that tradition, contemporary mythologies, and jealously guarded reputations be placed under inspection. Not all of these have withstood this critical interrogation. Many commentators depicted the silencing of the play as a sign of an ominous breach of the right to freedom of expression. For others, the riots made a mockery of the local council's efforts to present the city of Birmingham as a happily multicultural place in which diverse faiths live alongside each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Some within the Sikh community argued that the affair jeopardised the community's hard-won reputation for tolerance, industry, and respectability, and represented a terrible backward step in their journey to dissociate themselves from the radicalism of the Khalistani movement.

As the immediate controversy faded, there has been acknowledgement that the affair reflected genuine splits within the Sikh community. Many have confirmed that *Behzti* dramatises real problems with domestic violence and the physical abuse of women within minority ethnic communities, as Jaswant Guzdar pointed out in the last issue of this journal. But as the media encouraged the questioning of some reputations, it was busily constructing another form of contemporary mythology: a mythology which centres upon freedom of speech and the tradition of British theatre.

> **"*Behzti* dramatises real problems with domestic violence and the physical abuse of women within minority ethnic communities."**

The media coverage was almost universal in its condemnation of the actions of the protestors and in its insistence on the overriding importance of freedom of speech. Some commentators co-opted the language of faith, claiming that freedom of expression was also sacred and that the silencing of the play was an act of sacrilege in itself. Leading theatre directors affirmed their commitment to challenging, politically engaged work; government ministers celebrated the cause of open dialogue and debate; and journalists stressed the need to preserve the theatre's artistic autonomy, presenting the silencing of *Behzti* as the erosion of a long-standing British tradition of freedom of speech.

Having spent the last few years researching and writing on the issue of the censorship of British theatre, I consider these assertions to be partly wishful thinking, or rather convenient forgetting; a rewriting of history in which Britain has always been libertarian and tolerant rather than the kind of place that has a long history of religious persecution and silencing. Here, I think it's worth recalling that Britain has no written constitution that enshrines the right to freedom of speech. In fact, until the 1998 European Human Rights Act became domestic law in 2000, freedom of expression in Britain was merely a legal "left-over": what was left over after the application of the laws that cover libel, privacy, and obscenity.

Moreover, much as I might want to agree with Jaswant Guzdar's observation that Britain has a long tradition of staging controversial performance, I think it's also important to remember that all public theatre performance in Britain was censored by a state-sponsored licensing system up until 1968. There have also been several high-profile cases of censorship post 1968, such as the prosecution of theatre director Michael Bogdanov over Howard Brenton's play *The Romans in Britain* and the Royal Court's decision not to stage Jim Allen's play *Perdition*, as well as many more less well publicised instances of curtailment and compromise. And if these examples serve as

symptoms of a national history that has not always been characterized by respect for cultural diversity and open debate, then they also indicate that the application, and realization, of freedom of expression is rather more complex than the act of writing in support of the abstract principle.

Artistic works only ever exist in context. Theatre productions do not float in an abstract space where there is no venue policy, no audiences to cater for, no programmers, no funding application boxes to tick. In fact, I would argue that it is meaningless to talk about freedom of speech or expression "in principle." In practice, free speech is fraught with provisionality and conditioned by context. Indeed, the right to free speech is not something trans-historical, or universal, but is, rather, the product of a set of societal values that are context bound and value-driven. For me, the values at work behind assertions of the right to freedom of speech in the *Behzti* affair are indicated by the way in which all coverage noted the playwright's identity: the fact that she is a young, Sikh woman. Her identity was clearly crucial in legitimating the play and in securing media support for her right to express herself.

The future repercussions of the closure of *Behzti* remain unclear. As I write, Bhatti remains in hiding and has made no public statement since her open letter to *The Guardian* in January. Perhaps the play will eventually be produced again elsewhere; perhaps it will not. It's too soon to say whether the case will result in greater self-censorship by emerging artists from minority communities in the UK or from regional theatre companies such as the Rep, as some have suggested it might. I think, though, that as we consider the implications of this affair we should be more honest about our various traditions of censorship and silencing, and that we should avoid hiding behind platitudes about freedom of speech. In my opinion, a better way forward would be to admit when our beliefs are in conflict — and to carefully examine our understanding of the criteria we use when assessing the legitimacy — and value — of a controversial work of art.

Helen Freshwater is a Research Fellow in Theatre Studies at Birkbeck College at the University of London in the UK. Her interests include contemporary physical theatre and experimental performance, censorship, and memory in and of performance. Her work has been published in *New Theatre Quarterly, Performance Research* and *Poetics Today*, and she is currently working on a book on censorship and performance in twentieth-century Britain.

Violence and vandalism close production

continued from page 4

between who I am, a British-born Sikh woman, and what I do, which is write drama, is at the heart of the matter. These questions of how differences in perspective and belief are negotiated in Britain today will, I hope, continue to bring about a lively and vital debate.

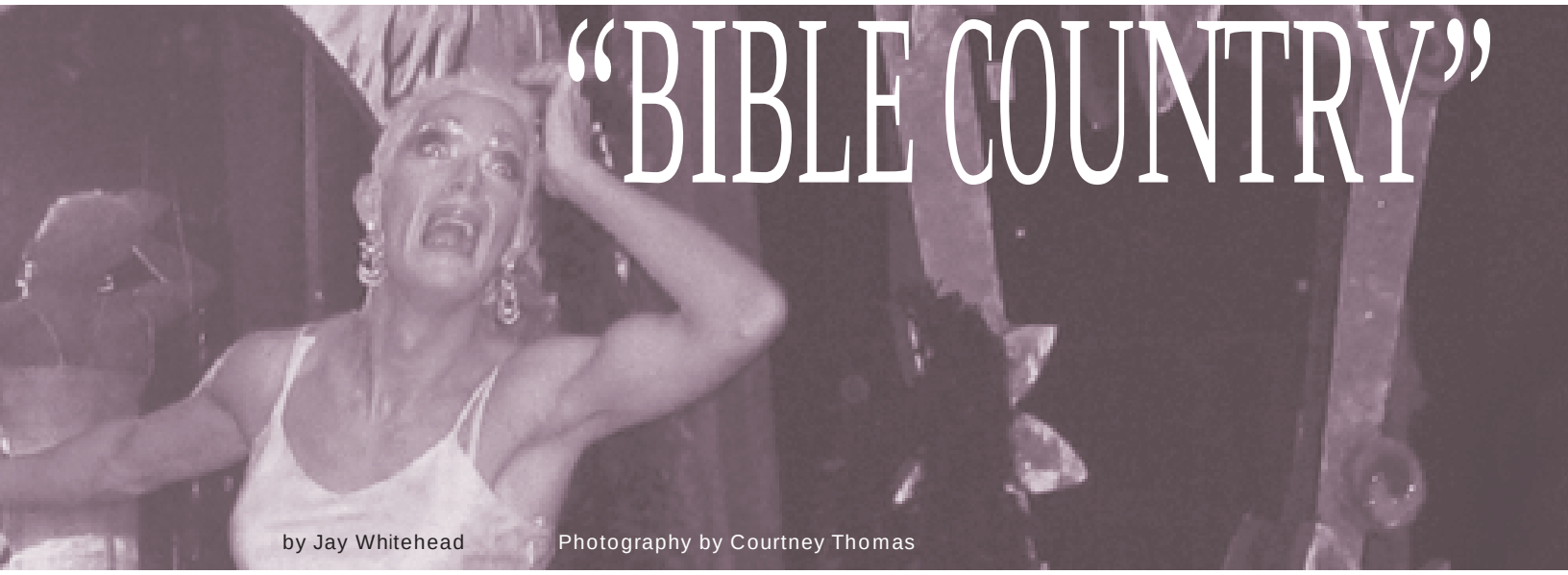
I believe that it is my right as a human being and my role as a writer to think, create and challenge. The dramatists who I admire are brave. They tell us life is ferocious and terrifying, that we are imperfect, and only when we face our imperfections truthfully can we have hope. Theatre is not necessarily a cosy space, designed to make us feel good about ourselves. It is a place where the most basic human expression — that of the imagination — must be allowed to flourish.

As for the threats and hate mail, these have stirred only tolerance and courage within me. My faith remains strong, and I pray that these days pass peacefully, that my life will normalise and that I can get back to working on my other commissions for theatre and television. Finally, I want to pay tribute to the Birmingham Rep, which has supported my work for the past six years, and to the show's fantastic cast and crew, who showed great fortitude under the most oppressive conditions. You can all rest assured — this warrior will not stop fighting.

Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's first play *Behsharam (Shameless)* broke box office records when it played at Soho Theatre and the Birmingham Rep in 2001. Her latest play, *Behzti (Dishonour)* was sensationally closed last December, after playing to packed houses at the Birmingham Rep. *Behzti* has since won the prestigious Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for the best English language play written by a woman. Gurpreet has recently written *The Cleaner*, an hour-long film for BBC1, and her first feature film, *Pound Shop Boys* (originally commissioned by October Films/Film Council). She is now working on stage commissions for the Royal Exchange Theatre Manchester, the National Theatre, Kali Theatre, and Maya Productions, as well as developing a new primetime drama series for BBC1. Other credits include the half-hour film, *Dead Meat*, produced by Channel 4 as part of the Dogma TV season; *Mera Des (My Country)*, a fifty-minute play for Radio 3; *Pile Up,* and *The Bride* (both commissioned serials for Carlton Television); *Londonee* (Theatre Royal Stratford East, rehearsed reading); *Two Old Ladies* (Leicester Haymarket); over thirty episodes of the BBC World Service Drama Serial, *Westway* (1999-2001); and nine episodes of *Eastenders* (2001-2005). Gurpreet studied Modern Languages at Bristol University.

DISCOVERING THE RELEVANCE OF DRAG CULTURE IN

"BIBLE COUNTRY"



by Jay Whitehead Photography by Courtney Thomas

"Scorned by home, church, family, and their best friends, they lived by the skin of their spiked heels, they were *DRAG QUEENS ON TRIAL!*" (Gilbert, "Drag" 407). The opening lines of Sky Gilbert's 1985 Canadian play rang out to audiences in Lethbridge, Alberta for the very first time on November 17, 2004. As the show's choreographer, assistant director, and publicity coordinator, as well as one of the queens, I found my life consumed by the show for months. The journey to producing this campy representation of a marginalized cultural group in this conservative stronghold was, to use Gilbert's fitting words, "an arduous ordeal, fraught with dangers" (Gilbert, "Drag" 408)— dangers that illustrate not only the significance of drag culture, but what drag itself reveals about how both queer and straight cultures view gender. We endured battles with producers and great apprehension as to how the show would be received by our community. One of our lead drag queen's parents in fact would not even consent to attending. Was Lethbridge ready for Gilbert's irreverent trio of queens?

A city of about 70,000 people, Lethbridge is nestled in the heart of Southern Alberta, at the center of Canada's bible belt. As a liberal-minded gay man, I had feared moving to Lethbridge because it would provide very little diversity and no connections to gay culture. I was concerned that the conservatives and religious zealots for whom Lethbridge was well known (at least by my circle of acquaintances) would stifle my passion for the arts.

I should mention that my interests in theatre prior to coming to Lethbridge were never part of a larger desire to promote "gay" ideas or present queer culture; however, my arrival in Lethbridge awakened these feelings in me. With each passing week I found myself increasingly, if subconsciously, offended by a lack of minority representation (sexual or otherwise) in the city. I felt a responsibility, if you will, to bring my life experiences and sensibilities to light through my work.

In the winter of 2004 I produced an evening of queer theatre and art at the University of Lethbridge entitled *Pretty & Witty & GAY!* It was a cabaret style performance, filled with gay-themed performances and artwork. Many welcomed the idea with enthusiasm and support; however, I was terrified that performers would not take the event seriously, or, worse yet, that no one would attend. But on March 21, 2004, *Pretty & Witty & GAY!* was packed beyond my wildest expectations. People came out in droves to support gay theatre, many standing at the back or sitting on the floor throughout the two-hour event. The evening was electric and exciting. It was clear to me that these stories needed a voice here in Lethbridge. That night, theatre provided this voice for a local cultural group that was highly marginalized by its community. *Drag Queens on Trial* would become my next major project.

One might wonder then why, if my interest lay in exposing the truth of queer culture, I would select a play about drag queens — a group on the fringes of gay culture. I believe that in the beginning I saw drag as a simple diversion. It was a way to create a buzz and sell tickets, enabling us to present the deeper message in the piece. My early opinion of the play did not extend much further than it being a confection whose novelty might fill seats. I had not considered the unique place that drag practitioners hold in society, the anomalous nature of their culture, nor what straight and gay reactions to drag might say about gender roles and our fears of sexuality.

This use of camp in drag culture is in many ways a rebellion against our patriarchal society.

As a newly out gay man in the mid-nineties, I remember attending gay pride parades and other queer events in Calgary and being furious at the drag queens. How dare they attempt to define me in a public milieu? At the time, these men dressed as women could not represent me or my sexuality: they seemed a perversion of it. Similarly, Gilbert recalls that when promoting the original production of *Drag Queens on Trial*, admission of the cast into certain gay clubs was refused because they were in drag (Gilbert, "Ejaculations" 87). This hostility could be attributed to gay male culture's general aversion to the feminine. It represents, almost, a form of bigotry in which effeminate men are devalued as sexually undesirable. To many in that cultural context, they are an embarrassment, or at the very least a disposable entertainment, as unsexualized or unneces-

sary as women. Gay men are drawn to "real" men, the masculine, the butch. These attributes are highly esteemed in queer culture. The request for "straight-acting" is a staple in gay personal ads (Gilbert, "Ejaculations" 89). This problem is dubbed "effeminaphobia" by drag performance artist David Bateman (38).

Although I had never before been a drag queen, I could certainly relate to the idea of effeminaphobia, having grown up with effeminate qualities myself. I had not realized how my views towards drag, as a gay man, would change through doing *Drag Queens on Trial*. I was doing myself and the play a disservice by viewing it simply as "light comic fare" (Bateman 39). The lives of drag queens were more than that, and for the first time I felt a connection between myself (part of queer culture) and drag culture.

This new found connection to drag culture can be attributed in large part to Gilbert's play, which depicts a culture so evocatively that our cast became obsessed with its characters. Gilbert concedes that each time this play is remounted "the actors become one with the work.[…They] always seem to bond with [it] in an almost scary way" ("Ejaculations" 91). This was definitely true of our cast. David Barrus, Neil James, and I became so involved in our portrayal of these queens that it seeped into our associations outside of rehearsal and performance. It literally consumed us for a time. We would greet each other with "I hate you" and bid goodbye with "bitch" followed by a kiss on the cheek. We did each other's nails in local cafes and hosted regular "girls' nights." Even our straight queen, James, took enormous pride in his self-given title as "the pretty one." Given our lack of knowledge about drag culture prior to this experience, I think our reactions in becoming these characters speaks to the power of Gilbert's work. His characters, I believe, represent this culture so accurately and are drawn so truthfully that they became alive in us. I was able to connect to the humanity of drag culture and gain an understanding of it by representing it theatrically.

The very campy format of the play in itself is a comment on drag culture. Gilbert compares the use of camp in his play to what he terms "gay postmodernism" ("Ejaculations" 59). He asserts that both "camp and postmodernism allow the artist to present romantic visions of life, while at the same time standing outside of romantic conventions, being critical of them, and sometimes even making fun of them"

Neil James, David Barrus and Jay Whitehead perform in Drag Queens on Trial

Culturally, we seem much more accepting now of blatantly artificial femininity: drag hardly seems that much more exaggerated.

(Gilbert, "Ejaculations" 59). This use of camp in drag culture is in many ways a rebellion against our patriarchal society. It is a means whereby drag queens can build their own culture, in which they live their version of the ideal without being slaves to dominant gender ideas (Shiller 25).

Effeminaphobia exists within straight male culture and its reaction to drag and drag performance as well. Macho behaviour is a performance in itself (Bateman 40). Men who don't play the role may be seen as a threat to male authority. For example, biologically I am a man and should therefore receive all the societal benefits (unfair as they are); however, I have always felt that I have been relegated to lower social positions, in much the same way as women. I attribute this to my possessing feminine gender attributes. In their failure to perform ascribed social roles, effeminate men might be viewed as a risk to gender hierarchies. As a result, feminine men lose status (Barnes 322). Drag can be seen as the extreme of this.

It can also bring up sexual insecurities for the straight male. A review of our production of *Drag Queens on Trial* was written by a straight man for a local university newspaper. The review was a rave. He spoke highly of the performances, costumes, direction, and choreography; however, in the opening of his article, he felt a disclaimer was necessary: "Now usually watching three men in short skirts, over-caked makeup, and six-inch heels dance and flit about […] is not my cup of tea" (McKenzie 1). There was a need, apparently, to insure his position as a straight man. Yes, he enjoyed the performances for their artistic merit, but he was not gay. Everyone needed to know that he was not fooled by — nor attracted to — our three queens. This seems to highlight a discomfort in straight male culture towards drag. When men's legs look good in fishnet stockings and short skirts, how can other men admit it? It's a terrifying notion that someone with a penis can look as good in a dress as their wives or girlfriends. Effeminaphobia could be the result of this fear or sexual insecurity, especially within a conservative, rural community such as Lethbridge.

The next culturally significant issue raised by our production was of drag's perceived misogynistic qualities. Many women, straight or gay, are offended by drag queens (Bateman 39). Perhaps they feel that its usual frivolity means to degrade them as human beings or make light of their sensibilities and behaviours. This would be based upon the premise that drag is nothing more than comedy (Bateman 40), a trap I spoke of having fallen into myself early on. It could also be a result of the historical significance of drag. In Elizabethan times, for example, women's social positions were extremely low and their sexuality under great

scrutiny. This was highlighted by the common use of drag on stage. Canons of beauty at that time accentuated flat chests and androgynous features of young males, unachievable by many women (Senelick 131). This is comparable to modern ideals of beauty.

We live in a society that worships the likes of waif-like Nicole Kidman on one extreme or artificially enhanced Pamela Anderson on the other. In our production, all three queens were extremely skinny and wore short skirts and large prosthetic breasts. Many women commented on how wonderful our legs and figures looked, even though there is nothing truly feminine about our physiques. Culturally, we seem much more accepting now of blatantly artificial femininity: drag hardly seems that much more exaggerated. It's easy to see, as Shelley Scott has suggested, how drag might perpetuate the unrealistic body images women must face through popular culture. The way women viewed my male body on stage and held themselves up to it as an ideal drew attention to the possibility that drag highlights the subordination of women through their objectification. It revealed our culture's flaw regarding female body image, as well as how drag culture could be perceived as a catalyst or a critique of its perpetuation. Femininity is drag performance, whether performed by a woman or a man (Bateman 40). Prior to our production, I had never explored this possibility.

David Barrus, Neil James and Jay Whitehead beg in Drag Queens on Trial

Lethbridge has had little exposure to queer culture, let alone drag culture, and Gilbert's play had shown them a part of it.

In addition to this, the language used in the play was considered degrading to women. The big stumbling block for our producing partners was the word "cunt." This is an offensive word to many, and Gilbert's play is peppered with it. In spite of this, we refused to remove it. Ethics was reason enough for our director and cast to stand firm on this issue: we had no right to censor Gilbert's play. Our producers argued that the word was offensive to women, but we felt they were missing the point. In an email correspondence from Gilbert, he counseled, "The play is culture specific, and queer culture is different from straight culture." Drag Queens call each other "bitches" and "sluts" and "cunts." The irony of men dressed as women insulting each other with derogations reserved by straight culture for women was not lost on us. If we censored Gilbert's words we would betray the truth—and the layers—in his work. The word stayed. And in playing Lana, who is the first to say "cunt," I reveled in audiences' reaction to the word. To my knowledge we received no formal complaints. Far from misogyny, what played out on the stage was the evocative portrayal of the discourse of a particular cultural group.

But was Lethbridge ready for Gilbert's irreverent trio of queens? Would this small and conservative community support our show and the culture it represented? Local media definitely took an interest, in part I believe because the show was a fundraiser for the local HIV Connection. But we also appeared on television and in print media quite visibly, although not in drag. This notwithstanding, two days before opening our biggest selling night was 18 seats of a 160-seat theatre. It seemed the answer to the above question was in fact "no."

Lethbridge would prove me wrong however. While our run did not completely sell out, it did on two nights, and we never had less than 90 people in the house. Our audiences ranged from university students through housewives to senior citizens. Many saw the show more than once during our five-day run. Every performance ended in a standing ovation. I was told on more than one occasion that we had touched people with our show. They had not expected to have their minds changed. They had come, as was originally intended, to laugh and have fun; however, upon hearing the stories of these queens, they'd been moved to reflection. Lethbridge has had little exposure to queer culture, let alone drag culture, and Gilbert's play had shown them a part of it. Perhaps we were just a novelty to many, but I believe we reached a few on a deeper level, revealing a culture to them that they were enlightened by. Theatre can be a powerful tool in creating and cultivating cultural awareness, and this past November Lethbridge was left "tits up humming a tune" (Gilbert, "Drag" 427).

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We both have truths:

ARE MINE THE SAME AS YOURS?*

by Ehab Lotayef

God exists! Growing up in Cairo, I had no doubts. It was an absolute truth. Moreover, to believe otherwise was unacceptable. Living in Montreal forty years later, I still have no doubt. God exists! Yet somewhere on the road from there to here and from then to now, a second absolute truth has come to complement the first. "There can be no compulsion in belief." To force anyone to believe in anything is clearly a paradox. All too often we witness those who are forced to *do* or to *say*, but no one can be forced to *believe*. Starting from this truth — which I note is clearly stated in the Quraan — I find myself continuing to evolve. Some of what I believed in — or had been convinced of by others — has changed, and I admit that this change hasn't always been easy.

To force anyone to believe in anything is clearly a paradox

Putting the two truths together, I have arrived at a conclusion in which I now strongly believe. I am convinced that a secular "human rights based" society — one that respects all beliefs but adopts no one in particular as the sole basis for its jurisprudence — is a model that all societies should adopt if they wish to attain justice and peace. We have to realize that so-called homogeneous societies are becoming fewer by the day. It is impossible for people who believe in different "truths," or even those who believe in the same "truth" in different ways, to accept being governed by a system based on one particular belief. The only feasible way to deal fairly with such situations is to embrace a system that respects all and judges individuals not according to their beliefs but according to their attitude towards others and their contribution to society.

I lived in times and places in which atheists and agnostics were denied the right to express their beliefs and were forced to remain silent. I eventually started to question such stifling practices and gradually began to speak against them.

Today, I am thankful to live in a society where no one — at least theoretically — is denied the right to believe in anything or the opportunity to express what he or she believes in. A system in which everyone is free to adopt the life style they want as long as they don't try to force it on others. In this atmosphere I expected that I also could express what I believe in through my art; that I could have God present in what I write and His influence apparent in photographs I take, without facing ridicule or opposition from those who don't share the same beliefs as me. I also expected to be granted the same freedoms when it comes to my political or social beliefs. Furthermore, I expected those who were once denied freedom to be at the front line defending everybody's freedom — even the freedom of those with whom they totally disagree.

But is this the situation? In the Canadian arts community I have frequently come across individuals who, because they are atheists, agnostics, homosexuals, etc., were oppressed by traditionalists here and abroad. Until recently, I had not doubted that they genuinely believed in the inclusive pluralism that gave them the rights they were denied for ages; but, alas, I was mistaken.

Many of those who have experienced discrimination now practice it. I find myself and others who want to participate without giving up our identities — and without having to conceal our religious affiliations

Many of those who have experienced discrimination now practice it

— rejected by some of those who experienced rejection.

The fact that the abused become abusers when they get stronger always shocked and disturbed me. This seems to happen on all levels, regardless of the nature of the abuse: individuals abused by family members, ethnic or religious minorities abused by the majority, or nations abused by stronger nations. No matter what explanation psychiatrists and psychologists offer, they do not solve the problem at hand. The only way to safeguard any freedom is by guaranteeing, not denying, everyone's freedom. Otherwise all freedoms are endangered.

The judgement of a work of art should be based solely on its quality, not on the religious, ethnic, or political affiliation of the artist, and not on the message or idea expressed in it. When we attain this in our art collectives, we will have attained freedom.

I, now, in most cases, accept others as they are, not merely "tolerating" them (acceptance is a level far superior to the tolerance advocated by the Canadian system as an ideal). And I know I still have a long way to go. I learned to admire a good work of art even if I totally disagree with its content, message, or the beliefs of the artist who created it. This didn't come without effort and I am proud of it.

In the meantime, I am who I am. Read a poem of mine and you will, most probably, have a good idea about what I believe in. Look at a photo I took and you will see where my sympathies lie. Work with me and you will find me excusing myself to pray when it is time for prayer. Accepting me as I am and judging my work without prejudices is an assurance of your freedoms, not a threat to them.

* Title borrowed from Tim Rice in Jesus Christ Superstar

Ehab Lotayef is a Montreal-based Canadian writer, photographer, and activist. His play, *Crossing Gibraltar*, was produced by CBC radio in February 2005; *Between*, his latest poetry collection, was published in 2003; and most recently he has worked as a lyricist with Maryem Tollar. Ehab traveled to Iraq in December 2003 and to Palestine in January 2005. A Muslim of Egyptian origin, he has a B.Sc. in Electrical Engineering from Ain-Shams University (Cairo) and is currently the Computer Systems Manager of the McGill's Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering.

The Downtown Eastside Community Play

by Savannah Walling

Cast and crew. Photo - John Endo Greenaway

although it is tremendously strong and united in some ways, the Downtown Eastside is fractured and alienated in others

In the fall of 2003, my company, Vancouver Moving Theatre, produced a community play for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Although we've created interdisciplinary and community-related performing arts for over twenty years, this was our first experience creating this type of community play. The responsibilities turned out to be daunting yet inspiring.

Located on a spit of land in Burrard Inlet, the Downtown Eastside is culturally rich and culturally diverse. First Nations people have lived here for over two thousand years. It's been an entry point for immigrants for more than a century. It's the birthplace of the city of Vancouver. For over a hundred years, people have gathered at the Carnegie Building on Hastings and Main to find lost friends, catch up on the news, and connect with the community.

Our Downtown Eastside home is a unique mixed income community of families and singles, housing and industry, shops and parks: distinctive, fluidly shifting, overlapping mini-communities include Gastown, Main and Hastings, Chinatown, and Strathcona. Each street is like walking in a different neighbourhood, filled with people from different walks of life and circumstances. Lots of interesting people doing different things make them interesting blocks to live in. Residents value their heritage and their socio-economic and cultural diversity.

But although it is tremendously strong and united in some ways, the Downtown Eastside is fractured and alienated in others: it's been a divided community whose groups don't readily interact because of mistrust, fear, and indifference that stem from language, cultural, and socio-economic differences. An inner-city location means inner-city problems: hard times, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, and drug dealing, as well as the pressures of gentrification and urban development. Still, after years of struggle — against demolition, incompatible new construction, and being treated as a "dumping ground" for the larger city's social problems — the community survives. We love our neighborhood.

For thirty years, the Downtown Eastside has been home to me and my husband and colleague, Terry Hunter. It's the community that gave birth to our art, to our company and professional practice, and in which we gave birth to our son. Perhaps that's why fate, along with the urging of the Carnegie Community Center, saw to it that we produce this community play for the Downtown Eastside as the culminating event of Carnegie's one-hundredth anniversary celebration.

Carnegie's vision was inspired by a form of community play discovered in Britain in the

Background Image: Birds eye view of Community Play Dragon in front of Carnegie Community Centre during the Heart of the City Parade Photo- Bob Moss

Vancouver Moving Theatre's Terry Hunter (Community Play Producer) and Savannah Walling (Community Play Artistic Director)
Photo: David Cooper

1970's by playwright Ann Jellicoe and brought to Canada by Dale Hamilton. Canadian adaptations of the form have been produced in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and B.C. In this kind of community play, a small core of experienced theatre artists work with community members (as many as want to participate) to create an artistic work of the highest achievable standard to express and celebrate their community—a play for and by the community. The artists are responsible for relating to the whole community, working in partnership with the existing systems, and refraining from taking sides on divisive issues. The artist's job is not tell them what to think, but to listen and learn from the community and look for opportunities for people to create art and get involved—because the more they help, the more interested they are.

We knew the task was too big, the time line too short, and the resources on hand insufficient. But we also knew the Downtown Eastside has tremendous talent. We knew the community's problems have been sensationalized in the Canadian media and its rare gifts ignored. We knew it was our turn to serve to the best of our ability. The vision was inspiring—and terrifying.

The pressures to succeed were immense. As Aboriginal community actor Stephen Lytton said, "[The] production was an enormous task, being where it's coming from. And the failure of it would have been far more damaging because of where it's come from. It was like carrying the weight of the whole community on your shoulders."1

Terry and I live in the Downtown Eastside. We couldn't leave after the play finished. We would have to live with the consequences: if our work fell short, the whole community would pay — not just us. What if our efforts shed an even worse light on the Downtown Eastside and its residents? We needed all the help we could get. It came slowly and in many forms. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, "There was tremendous collective will to make it happen. We were creating something historic that was important to the neighbourhood. It was important to hear a play that was powerful and spoke to the neighbour hood in a truthful voice."

Our community play turned into an epic, year-long event that involved over two thousand volunteers and twenty-five professional artists in every aspect: research and sharing stories; processions and skill building workshops (43 in all); building costumes, puppets, and sets; helping backstage; and performing. The project scale strained our small "mom and pop" company. It strained the play's resources. It strained our marriage. Everyone involved was overextended and over-worked. There were so many different responsibilities, from small to enormous, that we often had to remind ourselves we were only creating a play.

Our first responsibility was to make sure that we and our co-producing partner were climbing the same mountain. (It took a month to work out the details.) We agreed to operate according to the purpose and principles outlined by the Carnegie Centre.

The project scale strained our small "mom and pop" company. It strained the play's resources. It strained our marriage.

We agreed to celebrate the Downtown Eastside community's past, portray its present in all its variety, and share visions for the future. Focusing on issues the community thinks are important and giving voice to those who live there, we were to build new connections in a shared experience that bridged the neighbourhood's diverse cultural and socio-economic groups. We agreed to hire a culturally diverse team of artists that included women (and East End residents) in leadership positions, to develop capacity in the arts, and to support the community in making art. As part of the larger purpose of improving perceptions about the neighbourhood, we were to get media and the larger community out to the play. We had to fund-raise for the play and keep the project on budget and well managed. We agreed to balance process and product, and leave behind archives of the process, materials, and production

We were also responsible for meeting the Vancouver Moving Theatre's artistic mandate. We set out to create a meaningful, accessible show that engaged people's hearts, minds, and imaginations, and to this end we had to tailor the event for this unique community. Our theatre strives to stimulate new art through the interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange of ideas. Sometimes we put student and community performers onstage with professional performers. And of course we would strive to deliver professional service, quality, and value while working with an attitude of partnership, cooperation, and respect.

The artistic goals of this particular com-

munity play gave rise to further responsibilities. Our task was to write a musical play honouring the people and history, struggles and triumphs, cultures, and art forms of the Downtown Eastside. To this end, we planned to research significant events and experiences via an outreach program that would involve hundreds of people. We would retell stories heard over and over again and make up new stories inspired by real people, and then distill the script to stories of struggle and triumph that insisted on being heard today. We needed to create a script that would remain coherent while incorporating and interweaving as many voices, stories, songs, and perspectives as possible, and build in an unlimited number of characters for up to a hundred actors. We were responsible for assembling a strong team of artists who knew the neighbourhood, were good at what they do, understood and enjoyed a collaborative process, and had experience guiding and enthusing community volunteers — all towards establishing a collaborative process for generating new material, sharing images and ideas, and crystallizing themes. On a more mundane but still challenging level, we had to convert an empty hall into a theatre and clothe over one hundred and ninety characters. And finally, overall, we were responsible for mounting the play effectively and doing our best to provide everyone involved with a positive experience

With regard to our co-workers, Terry and I were responsible for providing an achievable plan of duties with clear priorities and goals, resources to fulfill the tasks, and follow-through on ideas and plans. We were responsible overall to admit to our mistakes and — to the best of our ability — to do no harm. We knew we had to be mindful of the consequences when we were making choices — some could help and some could harm. Decisions needed to fit our intentions, our resources, and our community. We tried to make our choices transparent, to acknowledge all help, to let things happen slowly, and when in doubt to compromise. We knew every person we met had something important to teach.

We also had responsibilities with regard to the neighbourhood. We needed to consult with the community (providing Chinese translation wherever we could) to determine subject matter, themes, music, and presentational styles, and incorporate their feedback to make sure the language and stories had the ring of truth, were culturally respectful, historically accurate, and honestly portrayed the Downtown Eastside. In all this, we had to honour the neighbourhood's unique social, historical, and physical characteristics; to witness without judgment and respect what it takes to cope and survive in hard times; and to give voice in a non-intrusive way to social issues that come up over and over again. We had, in short, to look at harsh realities without overlooking the "phoenix in the ashes." Our community needed to see and recognize itself in the play and production.

We also were responsible for hundreds of volunteers. We had to provide a safe and confidential place for sharing stories. We needed to cope respectfully with difficult issues involving security and inclusion-exclusion so we could provide a safe working environment for everyone, ensuring that everyone was treated with respect in every circumstance. We had to provide a fun, friendly, welcoming, and smoothly running environment for rehearsals and building sets and props. We were responsible for providing three months of healthy snacks on a limited budget for an unpredictable number of volunteers (some of them in great need) and bringing in tangible benefits as play resources improved (two cast suppers, four weeks of child care, complementary tickets, and an archival DVD of the show). And after the show, we had to provide transition events to close the circle on the project in a helpful way and ease the inevitable post-production letdown

The hundreds of participants were volunteers. They were unpaid, generously giving of their time and drawing on their courage to move into new territory. As professional artists in a community play, we had to be fully prepared at each rehearsal, support and speak with respect to cast members at every step of the process, and work out differences between members of the artistic team at another time and place.

The responsibilities we faced were large and multi-faceted. From the first day, the idea of a community play evoked both excitement and negativity. We faced distrust (of new money, new faces, and big budget projects) and suspicion (of "poverty pimps" and "make-work" projects). We met tensions (between cultural groups, between neighbourhoods, between "haves" and "have-nots") and resentment (toward foreign community play models that employ some and expect others to volunteer). Over the year, we stumbled onto bad memories, bad dreams, and bad feuds. We faced language, literacy, economic and cultural barriers, and issues of food, poverty, legal and illegal drugs, safety, and security. In order to make the play a familiar, welcoming, and intriguing presence in the Downtown Eastside and to build a web of support, we hired an outreach team who lived or worked in the Downtown Eastside's historical neighbourhoods and understood their concerns. We met with people and organizations to learn how we could work with them and what they could bring. We attached play-related events to existing programs and provided excellent and accessible skill-building workshops. In short, we did our best to meet distrust, suspicion, and resentment with respect and patience, and provide a safe and inviting public event where people could socialize and enjoy creative activity.

These responsibilities were enormously challenging. We drew on the experience of over thirty years of professional and community work. We learned on the job. We didn't always succeed. We worked as hard as we could for one year, but nothing we could do was enough — ever. We could have/should have/wanted to have met more people, talked to more people, and involved more people.

We worked too fast. We created a project that normally takes two to three years in just one. We took nine weeks to rehearse the kind of community play that normally takes twelve. Relationships take time to build. Trust takes time to grow. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, "You realized how fragile the thing was and the huge damage if it had failed."

The experience was not perfect for the participants. Some felt the volunteers should have been paid. As participant coordinator Leith Harris reported, some feelings were hurt and some people got lost along the way. Some people did not like their assigned lines, or did not understand the English, or could not read and were too shy to say. Some people misplaced their schedules or scripts. Some did not have phones and messages went astray. Some did not like the food. Others were disappointed or felt betrayed when a song was cut. Some things went missing. When security and issues of inclusion and exclusion arose, creative, respectful, effective solutions had to be

found.

Nor was the experience perfect for the artists. The artistic team were all overworked and needed two more weeks of rehearsal and more staff — including a chef! Sometimes people got sick. People didn't always get along. Sometimes they did not have enough resources or experience for the task at hand, or they were not as prepared as they should have been. And sometimes their vision was bigger than the available resources.

People faced family emergencies, plumbing problems, computer crashes, accidents, deaths, robberies, evictions, alcohol and drug issues, mental health and personality issues and many economic barriers. But, as Leith Harris wrote in a a poem called "published in the January 15, 2004 issue of *The Carnegie Newsletter,*

> The genuine caring
> and generous sharing
> of time, energy and knowledge
> made it all worthwhile and more.
> Plus – THE AUDIENCES LOVED IT!

When serious concerns emerged, cast members brought them to the producer as respectful petitions. Cast and artists were careful to protect the show and the rehearsal process.

Finally the miracle was accomplished: the play went up, sold out seven of eight shows, and earned standing ovations. Everything worked wonderfully well: the lights, costumes, music, choreography and script. The actors portrayed their characters with conviction, spoke with passionate understanding, and formed a strong, supportive team. I was so humbled to be in the presence of such strength and beauty, I cried for an hour after the first night.

The responses to the play, by both those on the stage and those in the audience, illustrate how overwhelming the experience was. "We met the challenge," stated Stephen Lytton, a community actor, "[W]e, as a people, came together and succeeded in that mandate of building bridges. The sweetest part was that we had worked together." Mary MacAulay, a Downtown Eastside resident, was full of praise: "*The Downtown Eastside Community Play* was powerful and humbling and magical and educational. Many of our friends, neighbours, and my daughter's classmates were in it and loved it from the inside out. We loved it from the inside in. We wanted to see it twice, but it was sold out. Bravo!" And Jo Ledingham's review in *The Vancouver Courier* was likewise enthusiastic: "*In the Heart of a City* beats with vitality and hope…These funny and brave performers are proof that the courage and humour that kept Main and Hastings alive and kicking through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is still around" (3 December 2003).

After the run of eight shows was finished, the aftermath arrived. Some cast members felt lost. The artistic team was exhausted. I was burnt out, emptied. Our company had no plans for the future. Who had had time to plan? We didn't know that wrapping up the play would consume one more year.

Big questions arose. When the consequences of failure are so immense, how ethical is it to commit to such an enormous project before you have the resources in place to pull it off? How ethical is it to do a big community arts project without some kind of sustaining follow-up? As organizing committee member Jil P. Weaving asked, "What do you do after the party leaves town and not everybody gets a goody bag?" Who does the follow-up? The artist? The community partners? The funding agencies? The community? But what could we do? Carnegie is a community centre, not an arts producer. The directors of Vancouver Moving Theatre are middle-aged and moving into new phases of personal practice.

This is what we've done. After the play ended, we organized a series of low-key transition events, including a thank-you party, a post-mortem workshop for participants, showings of the archival DVD, and a power-point display on the making of the play. We created an eight-panel display on *The Downtown Eastside Community Play*, which is now on permanent display at the Carnegie Community Centre. Carnegie Community Centre committed to produce a community arts festival, create a five-year community arts business plan, and research the feasibility of setting up an independent nonprofit arts organization within two years. Terry, as the executive director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, advised the community centre on these plans.

Vancouver Moving Theatre co-produced (with the Carnegie Community Centre) *The Heart of the City Festival*, which finished on October 24, 2004. Over four hundred artists (most from the Downtown Eastside) performed in sixty-two events at over twenty-five locations. This time we paid honorariums to all the artists. Festival events included a panel of community play participants (*The Downtown Eastside Play — One Year Later*), staged readings of three new original plays, and songs by local writers (*Through the People's Voice*), as well as two days of information sharing and skill building workshops for local actors (*Breaking into the Biz Forum*). From January 28 to February 6 this past winter, we associate produced (with NeWorld Theatre and PuSH International Performing Arts Festival) James Fagan Tait's adaptation of the novel *Crime and Punishment*. This project added five performers from the community play to a team of fifteen professional actors. These events are Vancouver Moving Theatre's way of saying "thank you" to the enormously talented community who supported last year's Downtown Eastside community play.

People in the Downtown Eastside are excited about the emerging community of artists and the circle of energy and hope. Community artists are excited about making and presenting all kinds of art and speaking about the community in their own voice. They are looking for training, self-employment — and job opportunities that will allow them to produce their art and live with dignity. Carnegie Community Centre hopes to make arts and culture an integral part of the economic and social renewal of the Downtown Eastside Community.

But what is next? And whose responsibility is it?

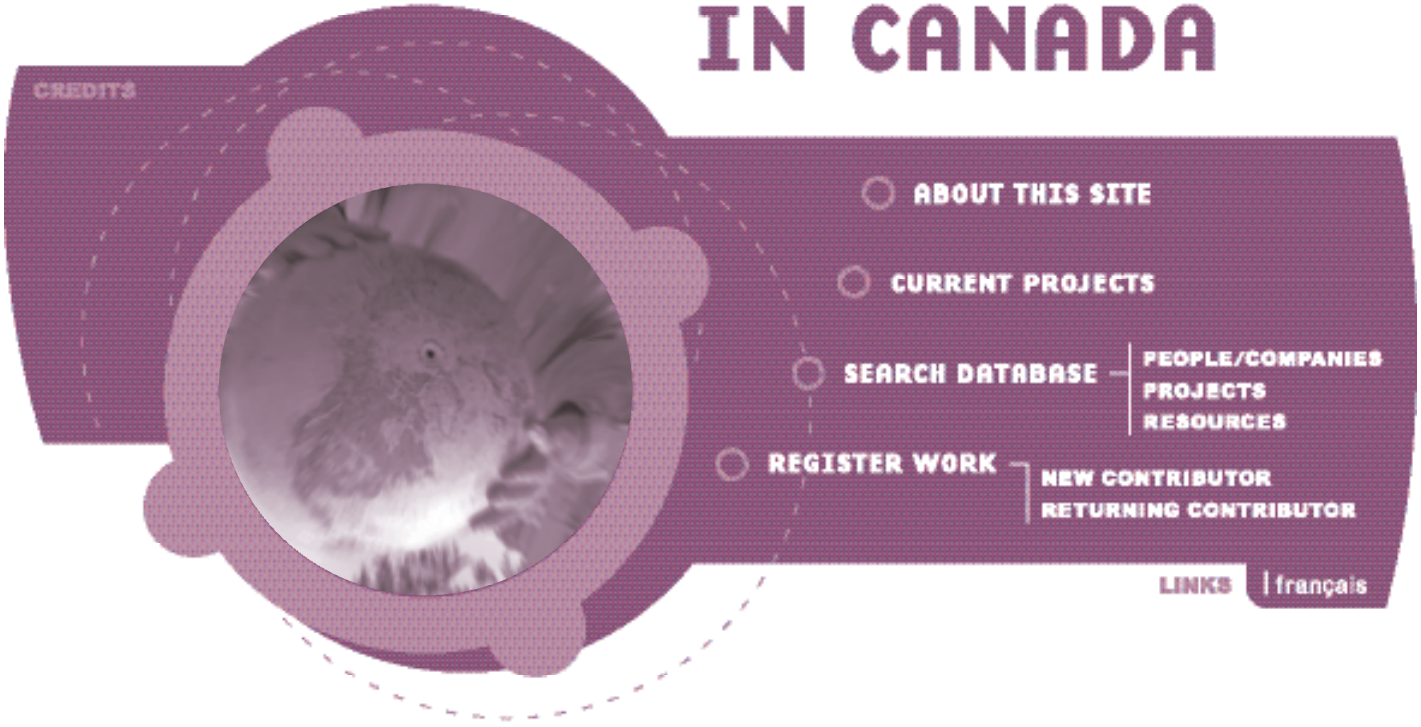
Since graduating in anthropology from Stanford University (USA), Savannah Walling has worked as a playwright, director, choreographer, musician, dancer, and educator, touring four continents. She collaborates with artists of many genres, techniques, and traditions to create accessible interdisciplinary theatre influenced by Vancouver's

Pacific Rim culture. As artistic director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, she has created or co-directed over forty productions since 1983. Currently, she is working on The Shadows Project.

All quotations unless otherwise noted are from informal interviews and conversations that took place over the course of the project and its aftermath.

This site provides a bilingual, searchable Database/Registry of Canadian projects, practitioners, researchers, teachers, and resources in the field of theatre and development.

THEATRE & DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA



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