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# theatre

cultural  
diversity  
the stage



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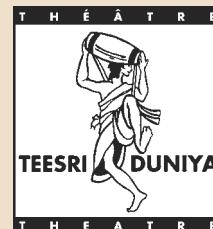
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# Ethics and Aesthetics By Edward Little

In his introduction to *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, Rustom Bharucha describes a formative experience while a graduate student at the Yale School of Drama in the late 1970s. Kenneth Tynan's criticism of Peter Brook's *The Ik* — a play based on an anthropological study of an African tribe suffering displacement and starvation — alerted Bharucha to what he characterizes as “an appalling lapse” in representation. The production invited the audience to “feel compassion and horror” at the plight of these people, yet the production program stated only that “as far as anyone knows the Ik still exist.” No one connected with the production bothered to determine the Ik's current situation. The experience caused Bharucha to reject his unquestioned acceptance of aesthetic criteria based on questions such as does this “work?” is it “true?” and how “real” is it?” and moved him to ask “Is it right?” “Is it right to do a play about people from another part of the world, with whom you have no real contact, but whose condition provides you with a convenient metaphor for ‘inhumanity?’” (1,2).

Ethical questions such as Bharucha's effectively opened a port of entry for a poetics of social action. Once landed, ethics sponsored entire families of related principles, first among them the recognition that aesthetics — to the degree that they communicate, promote, naturalize, or interrogate particular social and cultural values and ways of seeing and being in the world — are engaged in social engineering. In a multicultural society, consideration of the inter-relationships between ethics, social justice, and aesthetics is essential to a cultural democracy that would provide equal opportunities for meaningful participation in arts — including creation and training and across social and cultural demographics. Cultural therapists such as Frederick Hickling argue that this participation is essential — that the ideological and social transformation of disenfranchised peoples “must be based on the fulfillment of the needs of their own cultural expressions.” For Hickling, as for popular educators such as Paulo Freire, the evolution (or transformation) of any society requires both “the development of revolutionary consciousness and the mobilization of a culture of creativity” (Hickling *Interventions* Vol. 6.1: 47).

A concern with the implications of aesthetic choices within both a revolutionary consciousness and a culture of creativity is echoed by all the writers in this issue of *alt.theatre*. Each describes artists wrestling with the testing or advocacy of ethical principles within the crucible of practice. Rahul Varma argues that arts policy in Quebec, reacting to the perceived threat of English language domination, reproduces colonialist intentions that naturalize bi-culturalism and privilege Eurocentric processes and aesthetics. This effectively reduces eligibility for funding, and diminishes the artistic authority of representations of relationships between dominant and marginalized communities by culturally diverse artists within Quebec. In the Dutch company Dood Paard's reworking of the Media myth, Donald Moerdijk finds a direct and visceral experience of democratized performance that reclaims communication as a two-way, dialogic experience and exposes the operation of hegemony in consumerism, media, and naturalized / unquestioned aesthetic codes that reinforce divisions based on social class.

Lina de Guevara and Sarah Stanley, in writing about directing productions concerning cultures other than their own, engage with issues of representation and voice. Both cite local engagement as key. Stanley reflects on the social and artistic importance of fostering local community ownership and pride, while de Guevara's account of her process suggests that a cross-cultural approach offers certain advantages: it provides a comparative cultural perspective that draws new attention to things like awareness of one's own cultural codes; it provides a place where respectful questions about the other may be asked; and it leads to enhanced understanding of one's own culture and the empowerment to break oppressive and hegemonic silences.

Finally, Leith Harris writes of the continuing impact of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community Play Project on the lives of participants. Harris' concern with project follow-up reflects the concern of community-based and popular theatre to establish and maintain a relationship with its participants and host community that extends well beyond the actual time frame of the theatrical event. This is a vision of theatre as an integral part of the social and ritual life of the community, providing a forum that — in both process and product — encourages and rehearses meaningful participation in the public life and discourse of the community.

Taken collectively, the concerns of our writers describe many of the core principles of what Teesri Duniya Theatre advocates as *culturally sensitive dramaturgy*: local empowerment, identity, representation and voice; commitment to a democratized and dialogic audience/performer relationship; and accountability and transparency in the representation of socially and culturally determined intentions and values. The aesthetics of social action are all-too-often evaluated solely from the perspective of more mainstream Eurocentric criteria. Culturally sensitive dramaturgy insists that an aesthetics of cultural democracy be considered in light of its intentions and values and evaluated on its own terms, and that Bharucha's question — “Is it right?” — be primary. From the perspective of culturally sensitive dramaturgy, any representation or interpretation of aesthetics as ideologically neutral looks suspiciously like either propaganda for a status quo or an act of colonization.

# From Here to There: Collaboration and Voice

by Lina de Guevara

Since immigrating to Canada in 1976, I have been concerned with issues of diversity in the theatre. I have often complained about the misrepresentations (if presented at all) of Latin American culture in the arts and mainstream media. Witnessing, for

instance, Nicaraguan guerrilla warfare lightly used as exotic background for a version of *Carmen* makes me more adamant in my opinion that only those with direct experience of a specific culture should represent it. But I had to revise my rigid position in this matter when in 2004 PUENTE Theatre produced *Uthe/Athe* (There/Here), a very personal and culturally specific play written and performed by Raji Basi, a young Indo-Canadian woman, and dramaturged and directed by me, an older Chilean-Canadian woman.

Born and raised in Chile, I had few connections with India and scant knowledge of its culture and customs. I did feel a mysterious affinity, rooted perhaps in some DNA connection through the gypsies who travelled from India to Spain and encountered my Spanish predecessors. Some similarities exist between the Indian and Latin American family and social structure. But these associations had only a vague relevance to the background of this play. Directing it would be a challenging task, full of potential pitfalls. But Raji and I were strongly motivated and excited about the project, even though we were still unsure about the content of the piece.

The process developed intuitively. We had been talking about doing a play based on the reminiscences of very old people, where there would be a wealth of story to mine. "I have an 85-year-old aunt [Gerdev], who had to follow the strict path set out for

her, yet she's one of the most contented and settled persons I know," Raji told me. "Whereas I'm supposed to enjoy many choices, but feel confused and disturbed with questions and doubts." She wanted to understand this apparent contradiction and discover what had brought her aunt such serenity. Maybe this would help her in her own search for balance.

She videotaped an interview with Gurdev, and we gave the project the working title *Gurdev, a Long Life*. My curiosity was awakened by what she didn't say in the interview. She talked about her marriage at thirteen: all the presents she received, the saris and suits, the jewelry, the festivities, being carried from one village to the next, and being taken to live with her mother and sisters-in-law. But what about the bridegroom? How did the consummation of the marriage unfold? She lived with her husband for many years and had several children, but his name was never mentioned.

Through her answers to my questions, a picture emerged of the situation of women in an Indian village. At the same time, Raji's own connections with this way of life and how it had influenced her present outlook became apparent. I sensed at this point that the piece should be more about Raji's life than about Gurdev's, although she wouldn't completely disappear from the story.

A strong play could be developed about Raji's experiences growing up in Canada in a traditional Indian family: especially about her relationship with her mother, a formidable woman who embodied Indian culture in her expectations of and wishes for her daughter — and her intolerance and dismay at her daughter's attempts at independence. Raji followed the dreaded Canadian model that inspired children to leave home as soon as they were eighteen, to marry whomever they chose, or, even worse, to live with a partner without being married!

The new focus would make the play more personal and self-revelatory, which meant more risk-taking and more vulnerability. Creative work of this type requires a fertile and emotionally safe place for everybody: for the actor/writer to disclose and for the director to work through doubts and misgivings. Establishing an atmosphere of trust was essential. We looked for a methodology that would help us in this exploration.

Originally from Chile, Lina de Guevara is an actor, theatre director, and drama teacher. She's a specialist in mask work, transformational theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed, and Commedia dell'Arte. She's the artistic director of PUENTE Theatre, which she founded in 1988 in Victoria BC to create and produce plays about the immigrant experience in Canada. Her director's credits include *Mother Courage*, *I wasn't born here*, *Letters for Tomas*, and *Canadian Tango*.

“Directing it would be a challenging task, full of potential pitfalls”

We started our rehearsals with an hour-long meditation, during which Raji moved following her impulses while keeping her eyes closed. I witnessed the action and kept track of time. After this we would both write for half an hour. We didn't necessarily share these writings. They helped to create our working environment. Because there would be no exposure, we could freely express ourselves in them. We reasoned that relevant content would naturally become part of the play.

I would then ask questions and Raji would talk about what she wanted to say in her play. We were not concerned yet about having a story line or establishing a sequence; we were trying to turn a life experience into theatre. Raji's anecdotes, her love of dance and sports, her memories of India, her reactions to parental rules — all became raw material for scenes. We named them and made a list. During rehearsal, we worked to make the scenes more specific and theatrical, and in due time we found their order. Throughout the process, Raji did many rewrites.

In some instances, a play is not brought into being, but found. Many times I have felt that the role of a director in the type of theatre I do is equivalent to the role of a detective: Where is the play? How do you find it? What clues lead to it? I am like a hound following my nose.

We found some clues in Gurdev's interview: clothing and jewelry had to be an important element in the play. The fluidity of the materials of saris and suits, the luxurious wedding raiment, the beautiful colours and subtly different textures became an inspiration for the staging. Putting on a sari is routine for Raji but intriguing and attractive for me: we created the Sari dance.

The situation for women was revealed to me very powerfully in the story of the ceremony of death. Sometimes the birth of a baby girl, instead of being celebrated, is mourned with this traditional ceremony because of the burden she represents for the family — a heavy load some girls must carry. They encumber their families just by existing. This story became the starting point of the play, as it had been the starting point of Raji's life.

We found other clues in a meeting with older Indian women. We invited them — about twenty women all over sixty years old — to a social gathering with food and conversation. Four younger women, Raji's friends, took notes. Much of the conversation was held in Punjabi. As the only non-Indian present, I facilitated the gathering. It was a wonderful meeting. The presence



“Creative work of this type requires a fertile and emotionally safe place for everybody”

of these older women — their experienced faces, their clothing, their laughter, and their dignity — was inspiring. An enchanting six-year-old girl who was part of the gathering gave meaning to our attempt to explain the mystery of Indian womanhood. This little girl was very curious about me: she was clearly worried because of my lack of jewelry and beautiful clothes. She said, “Why don't you have a *salwar khammeez*? Where's your jewelry? We could give you some.” Without proper attire, I was not a complete woman in her eyes.

The younger women present wanted to discuss whether the traditional ways were still acceptable. But Raji and I wanted to listen, not to engage in discussions of right or wrong. After introductions and conversation, I explained the rules of a word game that we would play: I asked them to freely say the words that came to their minds when I said, for instance, “Indian,” “Canadian,” “wedding,” “family,” and so on.

Some of the responses were very telling. The word “Daughter,” for example, was associated with “love,” “friendship,” sadness, “headaches,” “responsibilities,” “sleepless,” “worry,” “groom,” “dowry,” “gossip,” “wealth,” “teaching,” “dressing-up,” and “luck.” “India” and “Canada” prompted words that revealed contrasting worlds: India was about “traditions,” “religion,” and “family.” Canada, about “freedom,” “good living,” “drinking,” and “drugs.” The word “sex” was met with laughter and

then silence. Uneasy looks were exchanged. Finally some words came out: “forbidden,” “silence,” “fighting,” “making up,” “important,” “forgiveness,” “cheating,” “wedding night,” “abuse,” “hugging,” “honeymoon,” “power,” “embarrassing.”

We received interesting answers to the question, “If you could say one sentence to a young Indian woman, what would it be?” “Get married ... no sex ... learn to sew, knit ... be honest ... learn good housekeeping ... learn to manage money ... respect elders ... have patience ... come home straight from school ... dress nicely ... no orange or purple hair ... live in harmony in your household ... make decent friends ... if your parents tell you to get married, do it! ... trust in God...”

As we were doing these exercises, I sensed that the young women were frustrated by the answers, believing them to be evading the truth. However, as the evening progressed the women became more trusting. Near the end, they started talking freely about their own experiences in marriage. Finally Raji asked, “If you had to live your life over again, would you do the same thing?” This provoked discussion and soul searching. One of the women said bluntly that she had been married at sixteen to a drunk, that she had been abused and lonely, and couldn't confide in anybody in her community. Other women described the difficulty of adapting when brought from India to marry an Indo-Canadian. Only one of them said that she had been content in her marriage. As if suddenly coming to a realization, a woman exclaimed, “We are doing this! We are asking our daughters to do the same thing we did, even if we were not happy? Why do we do it?” This question was unanswered. We agreed it was a subject for more discussion and reflection, and that was the end of the evening.

This workshop provided us with direction and content for our play. We could express at least the possibility of questioning whether what tradition dictated was appropriate for everybody. We wanted to express a difficult and complex situation. Although the culture was oppressive in many ways, we also wanted to show its beauty and power. Every immigrant's dilemma is what customs and traditions to keep and what to reject? What do they embrace in the new culture? How can they become whole persons when living in two worlds?

We agreed that *UthelAthe (There/Here)* had to truthfully express the conflicts and heartbreak as well as show the beauty, sensuality, longevity, and depth of the Indian culture. This would allow us to understand

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# Minority Theatre in Quebec

by Rahul Varma

In Quebec, non-white minorities represent a visible slice of demographics that is verifiably underprivileged and, to a degree, a product of post-colonial history. This demographic is producing original cultural expressions and art forms that reflect its cultural experiences, experiences that do not necessarily fall within the parameters of Eurocentric aesthetics. Theatre is one such art form.

Non-white artists are creating a theatre that examines the relationship between the dominant and the marginalized communities. Such theatre, relatively new to Quebec, distances itself in a carefully measured way from the life of the cultures of origin and embraces the everyday cultural experiences of the host nation, with all the attendant problems of acculturation and identity. The linguistic medium often is not the mother tongue of the practitioners but an acquired one – English or French, depending on which colonizing power “discovered” them. Beyond mere representation of the Diasporas in expatriate plays, this theatre speaks of the contemporary cultural identity and heritage of these new immigrants in their new countries, reflecting their contribution to the society they are living in now.

But it is not merely the primacy of French language over English that afflicts the English-language theatre in Quebec. The more general inadequacy of discourse on culture, history, heritage, and cultural politics — in addition to racial and ethnic diversity — complicates the problem of how to describe a minority language theatre that encompasses cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity. Quebec’s theatre of racial, ethnic, and allophone minorities is radically obscure, largely the result of cultural politics that has produced three unequal art worlds.

The first is the formal art world of white Francophone Quebecois, successfully situating itself in relation to the English Canadian culture. The second is the smaller active art world of white Anglophone Quebecers, who trace their origins to Anglo-European traditions. These two are formal and high-status art worlds, whose legitimacy corresponds to the power-sharing of Canada’s “found-nations.” The third is the distinct, relatively new, and low-sta-


tus art world of the non-white Quebecer: variously referred to as “multicultural,” “immigrant,” “diverse,” “allophone,” “ethnic,” and “art of colour” or “art of visible minorities.” As a representational medium, theatre depends on structural support, state policies, and specific cultural context. In this respect, the art worlds of white Anglo and Francophone Quebecers are privileged in key areas such as infrastructure (which includes the concrete material conditions under which theatre is created) and public visibility (which includes the frequency and length of theatrical runs). Further than this, the products of these three art worlds carry unequal aesthetic and market value.

Montreal is the only large Quebec city where the multicultural composition is visibly and numerically pronounced. The rest of Quebec remains culturally and linguistically homogenous, with an aging and declining population. Despite Montreal’s multicultural and multilingual vibrancy, so pronounced in everyday life, the city’s public institutions are not geared to fully and equitably serve corresponding artistic and cultural needs. Moreover, the rest of Quebec remains unaware of diversity entirely, a situation that has emerged as one of the major policy issues for Western democracies. Not only has Quebec failed to create programs to address the needs of cultural diversity and disperse it to smaller cities, a cursory examination of the province’s theatrical tours to remote areas suggests it promotes touring theatre that espouses cultural homogeneity instead of cultural diversity.

Quebec formally rejects the federal project of multicultural diversity. But this is a paradoxical stance, because the multicultural diversity of Canada — and thus that of Quebec — was to a large extent the consequence of colonial and post-colonial migration designed to strengthen the political economy of the country. Over time, this migration forced Canada to introduce cultural policies intended to address regional discontent (such as the Massy Lévesque commission of 1949) as well as issues related to cultural and visible minorities (such as the Multiculturalism Act of 1971).

The institutionalization of multiculturalism as a state policy in

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“Quebec’s theatre of racial, ethnic, and allophone minorities is radically obscure, largely the result of cultural politics that has produced three unequal art worlds.”

ing in Quebec, is among the most prominent writers of colour who has vehemently denounced multiculturalism in his 1994 book, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. In these two hundred-plus pages of rant, Bissoondath relies on daily newspaper clippings, journalists, judges, and a handful of analysts to prove the flaws of the policy. He quotes journalist Richard Gwyn, who called multiculturalism “a slush fund to buy ethnic votes,” and cites political scientist Christian

to multiculturalism as folklore, Lévesque reduced the culture and history of “the Other” to a mere refractory of exoticism. His choice of terms reveals more about his ineptness with regard to the people and cultures that make up multicultural diversity than the multiculturalism he claimed as a political ploy against his struggle. “A slush fund to buy ethnic votes”...“reducing Quebec distinctiveness to an ethnic phenomenon”...“refusing to recognize the bi-cultural nature of the country”...“fear that we are *all* ethnics”: these and phrases of similar rhetoric created a binary dialogue of Us (Quebecois) versus Them (ethnics). This split created a far more discordant trend than that of the original Anglophone versus Francophone, resulting in new kinds of cultural divides that have had a devastating effect on cultural confidence among the non-white communities. Lack of confidence among the non-white Quebecers continues to this day.

1971 formalized support for the idea of a Canadian identity constituted by a diversity of cultures. The late Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, who aggressively promoted multiculturalism as Canada’s national culture, argued that “uniformity is neither desirable nor possible in a country the size of Canada.” However, in Quebec, Trudeau’s history-making policy of multiculturalism was regarded not as a progressive social policy but as an opportunistic political ploy to diminish the primacy of Canada’s English and French roots, as well as to defuse the strong, and potentially revolutionary, nationalist/separatist movement in Quebec. The late Quebec premiere René Lévesque was blunt in his attack: “[M]ulticulturalism really is folklore. It’s a red herring. The notion was devised to obscure ‘the Quebec business,’ to given an impression that we are *all* ethnics and do not have to worry about special status for Quebec” (Colombo).

A score of analysts, in and out of Quebec, have lent varying degrees of support to Lévesque’s view on multiculturalism. Quebec writer Neil Bissoondath, for example, who refuses to be identified as an ethnic or a hyphenated Canadian liv-

Dufour, who in his book *Le Defi Quebecois* described multiculturalism as a “way of refusing to recognize the bicultural nature of the country and the political consequences of Quebecois specificity. . . . Multiculturalism, in principle, reduces the Quebecois fact to an ethnic phenomenon” (*Selling Illusion* 40). This is a fallacy on the part of Dufour and those like him; for, despite institutionalization of multiculturalism as a state policy, Canada remains primarily a bi-cultural country with multiculturalism as a minority component. The hierarchy entrenched in the original terms of reference still holds on the basis of race, ethnicity, and culture: in descending order, British, French, other ethnic groups, and the First Nations. Within Quebec, the order is tilted in favour of French over English.

Whether or not the federal multicultural program was designed to, as Lévesque puts it, “divert attention” from the “Quebec question” is a contested issue. However, Lévesque’s characterization of multiculturalism as folklore is an altogether different and disturbing matter, which if accepted as true would have profound impact on Quebec’s matters of cultural policy. By referring

Bissoondath’s book attracted attention in Quebec because it was intended to provide Quebecers with a Quebecois analysis of multiculturalism in the midst of an escalating sovereignty struggle. Bissoondath targeted both the policy and the fact that its makers believed it was made in support of treating all citizens as equals and recognizing their specific cultural, racial, and ethnic identities. The policy makers, Bissoondath suggested, had understood only the exotic aspects of these cultures. He intended to put forward a deeper analysis. “The public face of Canadian multiculturalisms is flashy and attractive,” he announces, repeatedly (and in part rightly) pointing out that the multiculturalism program supports national and regional multicultural festivals, which involve folkloric dancing, food and costume displays, ethnic performances, and craft exhibitions.

Bissoondath is frequently quoted on cultural policy matters by Quebec artists and the theatrical hierarchy, providing examples

of multiculturalism as a cultural aberration. However, this book tells us more through what it doesn't say than what it says. Bissoondath's discussion is homogenizing. His discourse creates impressions and representations of a collective whole in which individuality, historical complexity, and cultural dynamics are sacrificed. Minority cultures are reduced to a mere set of reminiscent habits and traditions of dress, and the dominance of "founding cultures" is recklessly affirmed. While he attacks displays of folkloric exoticism at ethnic festivals when they are produced by their own communities, he ignores the same exoticism when it is displayed, for example, in state-supported Jean Baptiste celebrations. At these events, multicultural diversity is flashed to fulfill dominant culture's nostalgia: it is presented not only for the novelty of the display, but also because of the way this novelty fits into the ethnic stereotype. This practice is commonplace in all national, regional, provincial, and municipal celebrations. And why not? After all, what impression would a state-sponsored mainstream festival create if all they could show off were scenes of how the explorers enslaved the natives or fought among themselves for control, and if the only local colour was provided by the costumed RCMP and the uniformed volunteers from the Legion and Lion's club?

By insisting on citing community activities with a focus on folklore, food, and fabric — which are elements of *all* communities, dominant and marginal, across the country — Bissoondath recklessly reduces multicultural diversity to a refractory of ancient traditions. He does this as if hugely complicated matters such as identity and culture were represented by shoddy displays of ancestral folkloric art: art that, Bissoondath should have known, is not derived from artistic aestheticism. Bissoondath doesn't seem to notice that these displays, although often funded (for right or wrong reasons) through multiculturalism programs, were meant to emphasize diversity of minority heritages and not artistic creativity. He does not spare much time and energy on more critical aspects of multiculturalism, such as education, social services, heritage, language programs, skill training, professional development, employment equity, and harmonious race-relations — all of which were addressed by the year 1994, before his book was released.

Bissoondath's argument obscures the possibility for more important criticism of multiculturalism — in particular, criticism of its limitations with regards to art and aestheticism. Although the multicultural-

ism program has been successful in promoting diversity, it was unable to promote artistic creativity for two reasons. First, few top artists have migrated into Canada (or Quebec) from the Third World countries even after changes in the immigration rules of 1967. Second, ethnocentric standards continue to be used by Quebec's cultural elites to separate dominant Francophone theatre from the theatre of racial minorities. These systemic barriers and the way these inequalities have been institutionalized are factors not addressed, much less critiqued, by Bissoondath.

Based on the official bilingual policy of 1969, multiculturalism was not meant to alter existing art institutions and public patronage to the arts. Multiculturalism was intended, although not without opposition from Quebec's political establishment and thinkers like Bissoondath, to restructure the existing system to accommodate all

**"in Quebec, Trudeau's history-making policy of multiculturalism was regarded not as a progressive social policy but as an opportunistic political ploy to diminish the primacy of Canada's English and French roots"**

cultural and racial identities on an equal footing. It was an official recognition that non-English and non-French ethnic groups existed in Canada and that the government was obliged to set in motion programs under which minority art, culture, and heritage were to be patronized. The policy as it historically evolved also led to an acknowledgment that the government's approach to minority arts was completely different from its approach to the dominant arts.

This brought to the fore two hotly debated yet important approaches involving public policy throughout the Western world. One approach warns against the ascendancy of any particular cultural identity over the universal identity of democratic citizens. In other words, if a society can ensure the equality of more universally shared rights and liberties, health care, education, welfare, etc. does it need to recognize the specific cultural identities of its citizens for the survival of specific cultural groups? This seems to be the broad practice, loosely

called interculturalism, in Quebec, and it affects the arts. The other approach recognizes, protects, and nurtures a particular culture while simultaneously ensuring the universal rights, freedoms, and welfare of non-conforming citizens. This is the trend in the rest of Canada, which has come to be known as multiculturalism and the politics of recognition. Recognizing these competing perspectives, we must ask, "Is political recognition of specific cultures imperative for the advancement of art forms and theatre that are not only representational but also aesthetically gratifying?"

In *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition,"* Charles Taylor points out that "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence." In this historically informed essay, he says, "Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm; can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being." Commenting on what is at stake in the demands for public recognition of cultural identities, Taylor says that "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need." ●

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Rahul Varma is a playwright and community activist who emigrated from India in 1976. He has been artistic director of Teesri Duniya since 1986. His plays include *No Man's Land*, *Trading Injuries*, *Counter Offence* and his most recent work, *Bhopal*. *Counter Offence* has been translated into French as "L'Affaire Farhadi" and Italian as "Il Caso Farhadi." *Bhopal* has been translated into French under the same title and into Hindi under the name *Zahreeli Hawa*.



# THE MAGIC CIRCLE

by Leith Harris

*In the last issue, Savannah Walling reported on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside community play project. Not only was the event a huge success, but the process and the aftermath made many lives more successful. Hundreds of residents from an astounding variety of cultures, social classes, ages, and abilities worked hard together, and, with the help of a number of theatre professionals, mounted a spectacular historical saga called In the Heart of a City. The special bond that grew between the participants seems to magically keep growing even now, over a year later. This article is a kind of epilogue, describing the effects the experience has had on a few of the participants.*

Often I've heard overworked actors and production people commiserate prior to opening night, "What a lot of time, energy, and money for two weeks!" That's exactly what I thought when I first heard about the project. Having lived and worked in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (supposedly the poorest postal code in Canada) for over twenty years, I've seen many initiatives and schemes come and go. Plans, paradigms, and projects imposed on the community from the outside usually fail. The community play idea, developed in rural England, raised many doubts in my mind. But I saw some familiar faces among the organizers, and they kept asking residents for their input. So I swallowed my scepticism and became the outreach coordinator for thirty of the pre-play workshops and the participant coordinator for the twelve weeks prior to performance.

Over a year later, I have close connections with the participants still. They are my friends, neighbours, and co-workers. Being in the community play project has touched and linked lives in profound ways, from professional (total career and lifestyle changes) to personal (increased career,

friendship, and love connections). I will present a few examples here, but there are hundreds more.

Each of the over fifty rehearsals began with one warm-up exercise — the imaginary ball toss. Sometimes the circle encompassed the huge hall, other times there were less than ten people. The idea was to catch the imaginary ball launched by director Jimmy Tait with a clap, then make eye contact with another person in the circle and throw the ball with another clap. No words. Sometimes Jimmy tossed up to five imaginary balls. Lots of action. Sometimes balls got dropped and lost. Lots of laughter. Each person's individual grace and clumsiness emerged. The mother of Emile Wilson, a ten-year-old Afro-Canadian boy who played four roles, told me her son had never been able to look an adult in the eye but now holds eye contact easily with most everyone. In the last year, Emile's self-confidence and school marks have soared. A visual alliance thrives between the people who played that game over and over.

Elwin Xie was a bored retail salesman before his involvement in the play — now he's a professional actor juggling offers. Born to a recently immigrated Chinese mother who had been separated from his father by the Exclusion Act, Elwin grew up in Chinatown during the sixties. In the eighties I knew him as a community activist, but he left the area and I didn't see him again until the auditions. Not only did Elwin play four roles brilliantly, he and his

**"Plans, paradigms, and projects imposed on the community from the outside usually fail."**

girlfriend donated hundreds of hours making props, sewing costumes, and building and painting the set. Soon after the community play ended, Elwin was urged by Terry and Savannah (Vancouver Moving Theatre) to audition for a permanent theatre production in Gastown, a fancy tourist area in Vancouver's Eastside. He ripped out his picture from the *In the Heart of a City* program guide and auditioned. He has been performing full time (medical and dental plans included) ever since, but will take a leave of absence to act in Jimmy Tait's theatre adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*. Extremely influenced by his *Heart of a City* role as a lost Chinese railroad worker (Elwin's own grandfather worked the rails) who is rescued by a Native woman, Elwin feels the Chinese have a debt to pay the First Nations Community. He has become a mentor for First Nations youths with the local Aboriginal Friendship Centre. On Tuesdays, he also volunteers to help young Native students at the elementary school that he attended. Elwin feels the play experience has brought him full circle, and he's loving it.

Downtown Eastside resident Sandra Pronteau of Cree/Metis heritage also acted for the first time in the community play and hasn't looked back. She has since starred in a play on homelessness and in the recent Downtown Eastside Cultural Festival History Walk presentations. A dedicated advocate and First Nations spokesperson for

many years, Sandra wrote, “I learnt about hidden talent and that I can actually sing. I always felt I was a performer but on a political level instead. Little did I know that I would commit myself to getting creative and be the characters when needed.”

Another person whose life was uplifted was long-time Downtown Eastsider Luke Day, who played two major and two minor roles. He writes:

In September of 2003 I was going through a very difficult time in my life. I was in a state of depression and despair, and living a surreal existence: I was working, but living on the street. I called Queen Elizabeth Park my home. I only found out about the community play because on the Sunday auditions took place at Carnegie the weather was abysmal and I went there to get out of the rain. I saw the audition notice and said why not? Once involved I began to regain hope. For the first month or so of rehearsals I still lived on the street, but soon got my life headed in the right direction. It is not a stretch to say that had I not become involved in the play my mental and physical health would have declined precipitously. The joy and sense of well being I received as part of that play ennobled and inspired me. I have been involved in two productions outside of the DTES this year.

Harriet Prince is an energetic and beautiful Objibway great grandmother. She learned to sew in a residential school, worked in many textile factories, and was taking a fashion design course in 2003. She attended one of the Metis dancing (jigging) workshops. The fiddling and jigging brought back happy memories of her “parents packing us kids to halls where they rolled up the rugs and jigged all night.” I asked Harriet if she could advise the costume crew about First Nations attire in the old days. She ended up sewing in the workshops at least three times a week, taking work home and returning with fantastic creations. She was also asked to play one of the grandmother roles and loved performing. Her son, who had been a make-up artist in Winnipeg, helped with the Opera inspired Chinese faces. Her daughter Brenda played two intense roles, and two of her granddaughters helped with

props. One of them also acted and the other did the childcare during the performances.

Brenda’s oldest daughter brought her new baby to the opening night, making four generations of Prince women present in the house! Harriet said this was a dream come true because she hadn’t had much of a family life. Harriet is now designing and sewing the outfits for Vancouver’s Metis dance troupes. Brenda wrote, “Participating in the community play was the realization and completion of a life-long secret dream of mine. I was given the opportunity to act on stage. I am a shy person but I knew I could do it. It gave me more confidence and sense of community because I see the people who were part of the play today and we have a bond because of those magic moments last winter.” Harriet, Brenda, and Harriet’s granddaughter Dakota, along with five other community play participants, performed with a local professional drum group in the recent Downtown Eastside Cultural Arts festival.

Like Brenda, Joelysa Panakea’s self-confidence has risen since her participation in the play. Joelysa, a young Indo-Canadian from Uganda, was the assistant musical director. She is proud that she was able to interact with so many different cultures, languages, ages, and musical talents. Joelysa never looked down on anyone no matter how “off-key” they were. She kept repeating how “real” the participants were and “like a family.” As the daughter of Hindu/Muslim parents growing up in Africa and then coming to Canada, she sometimes felt part of the lost generation. Integrating and feeling welcome in this urban community — which she had thought was dangerous — was a wonderful experience. Joelysa and Jimmy Tait have continued to work together and directed three staged readings of plays written by emerging local writers for the DTES Cultural Festival. They are also collaborating on the *Crime and Punishment* project, which involves five of the community play actors. Whenever a fellow participant is acting in another play, *Heart of a City* supporters are sure to be in the audience.

Everybody loves Jimmy Tait, the director. I’ve seen so many eyes light up when his

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name is mentioned. He flattered the best out of us all. To me, he seems like an alchemist or a magician seeking out gems — polishing, expanding, and igniting them until they glisten as stars. Within a few days, Jimmy could connect over one hundred new names with faces. Susan Poshan Wong, also a first-time actor, was in awe of Jimmy’s memory for names: she said English-speaking Canadians always forget or call her someone else’s name. Jimmy would respond to this with something like, “Well, I had your pictures and you’re all so uniquely beautiful.” Jimmy makes people feel good and want to give their best. And they did. When asked how the community play has affected his career, Jimmy went on in eloquent terms for twenty minutes. He was deeply moved by the variety — and the simplicity:

Different cultures, different walks of life exploring expression at its root produced a great deal of power that couldn’t be ignored. Professional theatre can be overworked, overloaded to the detriment and overstimulation of the audience. This play reminded me that theatre was a community event where one group could guide another through everyone’s experience. It reminded me that theatre could be a spiritual event where one group of people holds a simple thought, word, gesture and the audience is drawn in.

The most valuable capacity-building tool I learned in this process was from watching Jimmy’s style of constant appreciation, encouragement, and humour. The saying “What goes around, comes around” was always immediately realized in his presence, as faces brightened in response. Jimmy says he gets tremendous support and considers himself “a very lucky soul on this planet.”

Vancouver Moving Theatre (Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling) has definitely embraced and expanded the circle. The extensive and sensitive follow-up has been such a welcome relief. Savannah wrote that they felt they were responsible for providing “post-project transition events to close the circle on the project in a helpful way and ease the inevitable post-production let down” (something many of us were worried about). Not just events, but follow-up letters, phone calls, e-mails to participants, and opportunities were offered whenever possible with lots of encouragement. These together with the massive community enthusiasm for more projects ensure that each ending becomes a new beginning. Many tender and lasting connections formed between cultures, classes, and generations to create this magic circle. Many of the participants expressed how surprised they were at just how rich the

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# MedEia, by Dood Paard

(THÉÂTRE DE LA BASTILLE, PARIS, FESTIVAL D'AUTOMNE)

by Donald Moerdijk



The title conflates the Medea myth and the myth of the media. The latter are presumed to communicate. Medea is unable to communicate. She has followed Jason, the Greek marauder who came to her country looking for gold. Now a wandering alien, she never stays anywhere long enough to understand local codes. Like a tourist, she substitutes her own codes: an act of violence. Frustrated, she expresses herself. She "writes." In blood.

One works this out afterwards.

When one enters the theatre, the three actors, two men and a woman, are sitting on stools against the rear wall of the bare stage. They are not together but apart, looking at the audience, calmly, without undue curiosity, but with interest, almost as if we were the players and they the audience. They are not in costume — less, indeed, than we in the avant-garde audience are. Dressed unremarkably in unisex clothes neither fashionable nor unfashionable,

**"The actors do not seem to be characters in the play. They are apparently unidentified by character just as they are unidentified by gender."**

neither formal nor informal, they seem to want to fit in discreetly, so that only the expanse of stage between them and us will separate us into two categories — actors and audience; they seem to be like us, but performing a different function — us, in fact, but in a different role.

It is only later on that one realises that they are all barefoot. And later still that their toenails are all painted red, their fingernails too. Are they men or women...? Both...? Before we can think this out, however, the action has started. The woman and one of the men have walked to opposite ends of the stage and, pulling at strings, hoisted like a weather beaten sail a paper screen patched up with tape to form a backdrop that vaguely suggests ... what? A map? An abstract landscape? Mountains? Clouds? The actors then march out in front of this and take up positions at each end and in the middle. They begin to speak and to gesticulate on the deck, telling the story of Medea.

But who is it that is speaking? This is not clear, and it becomes only a little clearer in the course of the performance. The actors do not seem to be characters in the play. They are apparently unidentified by character just as they are unidentified by gender. They are voices, talking, shouting, gesticulating, recreating for us the horrifying story of Medea and Jason: sometimes the voice of Medea, sometimes that of Jason, migrating from mouth to mouth and actor to actor and generating their gestures; but mostly the voice of nei-

ther protagonist, a choral voice, sometimes omniscient, almost divine, sometimes completely ignorant, all too human, benevolent, bestial, a whole host of voices, floating and unattached. Verba volant. This absence of fixity seems to increase their intensity; our attention, finding no visible thing to rest on, remains mobilised to the extreme, vibrating with this discourse that cannot be objectified.

Attention can come to rest only on the actors, who do not represent anybody but present voices that construct some strange sort of meaning. The actors are simply themselves, saying something about Medea and Jason to us, who are simply ourselves, hanging on their words, looking at them as they look at us: people communicating with people.

What is taking place is communication. This term is used here in its full, original sense (the opposite of that current today, a misnomer which corresponds rather to expression).

Communication is dialogic. The media, however, do not dialogue; they express (world-) views that are already formed. Expression (also to be taken in its original sense of pushing outwards) is mono-logic, a relationship between oneself and what one writes or says; it consists in producing an objective equivalent of one's subjective thought. It is an act of authorship, carrying authority; it favours writing (scripta manent, more substantial than thin air) and tends to preclude reciprocity. Like the media, traditional Western theatre expresses authorised views: those of dramatists, relayed by directors.

Here, the collective soliloquy of traditional theatre has been replaced by dialogue, not just on the stage — represented dialogue — but dialogue, mute though real, between stage and stalls. The actors are not peering into the black hole of the hall,

projecting into it a playwright's message, but looking into our eyes to make sure that we are following what they themselves have to say. Personally. This is something new. (Though it has happened before, each time it has been new.) It has had to be organised. We will see later how. The switch to communication makes it possible to develop a new performative language, releasing the play from a number of key constraints.

The first of these is coherence. Logical articulation, which is necessary if the meaning is to subsist independently of the relationship between players and audience and to give it enough density to keep it from melting into thin air, can be dispensed with and replaced with a network of associations. This can be used to convey a mixture of contradictory meanings, a good deal closer to life than the traditional stereotypes. The myth of Medea can be fragmented and remixed — Dood Paard draws from all versions of the story, Euripides to Mueller — and, delivered from the still-life of books (and deep-freeze of museums and mausoleums), resuscitated in all its primitive vigour.

The grip of chronology is loosened. Serial time can be replaced by a variety of parallel arrangements: alternative developments and interpretations, flashbacks, changes in focus, reverses. Treatment of time becomes unpredictable, creating suspense and heightening attention.

Space has also changed. The action takes place in four “acts” — not the four episodes or phases of the narrative canons first formalised in Greek drama, but furious

flurries of activity, violent, inconclusive rounds — rather as in boxing. At the end of each, the actors rip apart the backdrop — the landscape to which we have become attached — in a gesture of shockingly decisive brutality. The next is raised, a new sail, a new scene, bringing a little closer to the audience, inexorably, the ship borne by the bloody wave of words that is already overwhelming us. As if somewhere a jolting shift of paradigmatic continents marked the as yet unintelligible progress of the invisible beast slouching towards some new Bethlehem to be born.

In between the acts, there is a pause; we yearn for respite, but it is breathless. A slideshow of tourist shots flashes on to the new screen at breakneck speed: a kaleidoscopic world of half-understood monuments, generic beaches, restaurants, churches, markets — all drained of meaning but enlivened with dashes of standard local colour — picturesque people with smiles we don't have time to interpret. This is the blinding world of the tourist — that global alien surrounded by aliens — in which we glimpse through a glass darkly the civilised Greek world in which Medea, the barbarian enchantress, must have found herself entrapped. In which we too are entrapped...? Helpless, sanguinary half-blind magicians all?

The actors speak in basic English, their diction very clear, though they make no attempt to disguise their Dutch accents. It is not their language they are using, but everybody's — a neutral, international lingua franca, both our language and theirs.

And not just the language is everybody's, the thoughts are too. We begin to recognize them: clichés taken from pop songs. Banal thoughts, jingles from the media, the global vernacular and pop wisdom that have ousted the old culture and its ideal of universality; but they have undergone some strange transformation, as if some transcendent DJ had mixed them, describing indescribable horrors in the trite media language of bliss.

How? By means of the “cut-up” technique, inspired by the surrealists, formatted as a technique by the Beats, and subsequently globalised by DJs; Dood Paard extends it beyond language, to theatrical semiotics as a whole. In an attempt to express the inexpressible? No: as we have said, Dood Paard is not trying to express anything; it is trying to communicate. To communicate without expressing...? What can this mean? It can only mean that instead of transmitting (or massaging) a message (a meaning) that is already cut and dried, it aims, by cutting up and trying out new combinations of these cut-and-dried meanings, to work out in common, by reciprocal “massage,” the significance of Medea today — and that of the media.

Dood Paard (Dead Horse), to break the tradition of what I have called expression, has democratised the social structure of theatre, attempting to involve everybody in production and to bridge the gap between (active) performance and (passive) reception, between a (thinking, governing) elite and the (massified) people. A series of ruptures, breaking the links between actor, director, and playwright — at the same time

**“they have undergone some strange transformation, as if some transcendent DJ had mixed them, describing indescribable horrors in the trite media language of bliss.”**



# Montreal Mirror

by Sarah Stanley



“I fully felt that to keep the references specific to Toronto would be to rob our Montreal audience of an immediate and heartfelt connection to the characters.”

When Rahul Varma approached me to direct (Nina Aquino and Nadine Villasin's) *Miss Orient(ed)*, I did three things:

1. Silently wondered, “Who, me?”
2. Audibly sighed with relief (that there was still an appropriate amount of lead-in time — almost a year!).
3. Agreed to read the play. (Very funny. Throughout this third “action item,” I laughed a lot.)

I then came back to Rahul with an entirely provisional yes. The yes depended on two preconditions (All else would be relegated to the noncommunicable areas of good fortune and discovery):

1. The playwrights would have to allow us to change original Toronto references to Montreal — otherwise I felt the theatrical value of doing the show in Montreal would be undermined.

AND

2. We would have to find five kick-ass Philippine-Canadian performers — otherwise I felt that the show would be counter-productive.

These — for me — were utterly unusual demands (after all, I didn't know anything about the Montreal-Philippine Theatre community), but I *felt* them to be necessary *and* presumptuous.

Cut to the run of the play:

1. Audiences howling with recognition when (*par exemple*) the “South Shore” was mentioned.

AND

2. Audiences leaping to their feet with utter glee at the incredible assembly of kick-ass Philippine Canadian acting talent!

It *feels* “needless to say,” and yet, had the two provisions not been met, this article would not be written. Moreover, I might have missed the opportunity to reflect. These writings are therefore an attempt to *reflect* (in brief) on the movements of the process — to pull out a compact mirror and have a look. The *dramatic conflict* of creating our production happened very early in the process. The two preconditions *were* met. Everything else was the simple (and joyous) work of preparing to share this delightful world with the audience. In terms, therefore, of critical analysis,

the *introduction*, *development*, and *climax* of our process happened at the “yes” and the *denouement* has been continuing ever since! But I will do my very best to leave a bit of *revelation* to the last paragraph.

In the meanwhile, I will rewind. Ted Little suggested that I share some of my thoughts about what I chose to really focus on in terms of cultural clarity and what I decided to simply let play. I think — if I fully understand the question — the answer stems from the preconditions: local references (Montreal! Here! Now! A world the audience can taste and smell.) coupled with great comic/performance talent.

The first precondition was unusual, to say the least. I think in some circumstances this might be perceived as an untowardly invasive request. Writers often feel that the universal is revealed through the specifics of the details. And this can be completely true. But for this piece, with its “cabaret/reality/live/jive/fashion show feel,” I fully *felt* that to keep the references specific to Toronto would be to rob our Montreal audience of an immediate and heartfelt connection to the characters. And I am forever indebted to the writers for allowing us to make those changes. Not only did the changes work, they also provided an excellent forum for the company to come together on the same page, and subsequently gave us a unified energy with which to leap onto the same glorious stage! And I can also report that with regards to the very powerful and healthy Montreal Philippine community, the sense of ownership went a long way to making this production such a specific success: so much so that it was recently voted the best theatre production of the year by *The Montreal Mirror*.

I have worked on many different kinds of material but generally have found that during the earlier stages of the development of a specific cultural idea, the creators are — more often than not — the performers as well. (I think this is rarely ideal or by choice.)

This was, however, partly the case with the first production of *Miss Orient(ed)* in Toronto. Both writers were perform-

Teesri Duniya Theatre  
presents the Montreal premier of

# Miss orient(ed)

by Nina Aquino and Nadine Villasin  
Directed by Sarah Starley

A beauty contest is the setting for this hilarious (de)construction of the Filipina-Canadian ideal as contestants vie for the title of Miss Pearl of the Orient. The big question is Who Wins? Trois jeunes concurrentes se disputent le titre de Perle de l'Orient à concours de beauté.

Starring Cecile Cristobal, Elizabeth Lofranco,  
Cardyn-Fe Trinidad, Emilee Veluz and Nadine Villasin  
Stage Manager: Luciana Burcheri  
Set and Costume Design: Madeleine Saint-Jacques  
Lighting and Video Design: Steve Schon  
Sound Designer: Michael Leon  
Technical Director: Jody Burkholder  
Production Team: Laurel Sprengelmeyer and Nidhi Khanna  
Graphic Design: Tracy Martin

“my only real job was this: Find five women who could match the material.”

experience, we could simply experience our experience.

And in the main (and “on the main,” for those who know Montreal) it did this because we believed the characters, and further, we believed that the characters lived where we did. I love the story about the Muscovites who attended the original *Three Sisters*. These first audiences were reputed to have made many return visits to the show. When asked what their evening activities would be, they apparently said that they were “off to see the Prozorovs.” Something about the familial and the familiar, and something definitely about the connection, make this a story — apocryphal or not — that I love. Not at all unlike my *feelings* surrounding our production of *Miss Orient(ed)*.

Perhaps that anecdote responds to my original “Who, me?” And the performance space on St. Laurent (transformed by the design team to reveal the *epitome* of “runway in your community centre chic”) was proof of having had the necessary lead time for the endeavour. And as for the funny? The very funny aspect of this play? Here’s what we did. We made sure that the play that was written spoke *honestly* to the audience. We did everything required to make the space between what was being said and what was being heard as clear as possible, and the rest took care of itself. And we made absolutely sure that it glimmered and shimmered — not unlike a Montreal Mirror. ●

Sarah is a director, teacher, dramaturge, performer, theatre type creature. Recently She developed the Magnetic Encounter Series for The Magnetic North Theatre Festival. Sarah just directed Jason Cadieux's "17.5", for the Summerworks Festival in Toronto, and is hard at work on Henry IV Part 1 with the Concordia Theatre Department.

ers in the original production. This is not surprising since they are both wonderful performers. But it was possibly taxing; they might have preferred to have been “simply” writers, with an opportunity to witness and work their work.

So here was a script — both funny and moving — that needed local acting talent to match its strength. In “ideal” circumstances, all the assembled “talents” should obviously match one another. However, in my experience culturally diverse work is often dependent on a PRIME MOVER (or MOVERS as the case may be). These *instigators* guide a project from inception through to fruition. I have seen unparalleled eruptions of talent as a result of this phenomenon. And therein lies the rub! Because *unparalleled* and *eruptions* are two words that imply that “this can not be done again.” More often than not (if their work is going to be restaged), the writer is forced to remain the performer, who in turn is forced to remain the producer, who in turn becomes the director. It doesn’t take long before the artist, as well as the work, begins to suffer because the artist has no opportunity to breathe.

If the goal is to share stories imbued with meaning, then one has to presume that the stories might want to be retold. And for them to be retold, there needs to be a strong community of tellers. So my only real job was this: Find five women who could match the material.

And I did.

But I cheated. And I hope that Nadine Villasin (one of the co-writers) will forgive me! (But she *was* the best woman for the job.) Nadine’s performance did allow us to make some strong dramaturgical decisions regarding the character of Jennifer. These might not have been possible had she been in another city...!

I recently saw the film *Au Soleil, Même la Nuit* by Éric Darmon and Ariane Mnouchkine [Fr., 1996, 142 min], where I heard Mnouchkine of Théâtre du Soleil say (in French — so pardon the loose translation) to an actor, “Don’t invent, just discover.” That says it! How else do I explain what, in practice, turned out to be so compellingly clear? This play — and therefore this process, and therefore this production — asked that I dig into the city we were in, to look for *all that was* rather than invent what might or might not be.

So.

Here’s the thing.

What we ultimately uncovered was what was already known from the original Toronto production — the play worked. We didn’t have to invent anything; we just had to strip it bare so it could speak — unedited — to its audience. Get it to a place where it didn’t ask us — the audience — to *think* about how we might feel. Instead, it fully encouraged us to *feel* how we *feel*. (Fully, blissfully, and not without tremendous grief and loss.) In other words, we did not have to translate or filter our

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the importance of keeping in touch with these profound roots for Raji: why she strives to stay true to them while going her own way in her life in Canada.

In spite of my initial trepidation, I was able to find a path as director and dramaturge in this project through my interest in the lives disclosed to me, my admiration for what I encountered, and my delight in the beauty and mystery of Indian culture. Thanks to *UthelAthe*, a fragment of Indo-Canadian reality has been revealed to me. The response of our audiences show that they also experience a sense of discovery and admiration. *UthelAthe* remains in PUENTE's repertory, and we consider it a piece that truly expresses our mandate of building bridges between individuals and between cultures. ●

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history of our neighbourhood is and how much we are a part of it. Most of us want to do it again. The circle grows stronger. ●

In the Heart of the City, The Downtown Eastside community play, was produced by the Carnegie Community Centre and Vancouver Moving Theatre in the fall of 2003 in Vancouver BC.

Leith Harris has lived, worked, played sports, and belonged to theatre and writing groups in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for about twenty years. With the Downtown Eastside Women's Writing Group, she published poetry in *Rituals of Rock* and wrote one-sixth of the stage musical *Rare Earth Arias*. She also published work in *Surviving with Grace*, a poetry/prose anthology, and she will have a poem published next spring in the Poetry Institute's anthology of *Canadian Poets*, *The Golden Morning*. Leith's first stage play, *Fits the Description*, was read last fall in a Vancouver Moving Theatre production.

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as those between players and the community — releases a flow of forgotten continuities and repressed energies, radically changing traditional roles. Actors have taken over the functions of playwright and director and are apparently exercising them collectively, without any form of hierarchy or outside control.

This can all be seen as part of the great struggle to resume the democratization of European culture, which was taken over by the state in the sixteenth century when it was nationalised as part of an overall strategy of control by the emergent absolute monarchies. Culture was harnessed to authority — a trend that has always been resisted and subverted in the Low Countries. This was not just a question of content (culture could express a variety of ideologies) but of form. The theatre became the focus of culture and the model of the body politic. Perspective and authority were (literally) built into the theatre à l'italienne, implicitly limiting all points of view other than that from the Royal Box. Bourgeois theatre subsequently strove to give all spectators an equivalent view (the cinema and TV have maintained this). But while equality progressed, authority, with its fixed perspective, remained; even when the theatre in the round did away with fixed perspective, authority was maintained.

Dood Paard aims at reducing and even eliminating both perspective and authority, and it succeeds to a remarkable extent in doing so. The company is an "actors' collective," part of a Flemish and Dutch movement that has developed over the past decade and a half. Projects are discussed and tried out around a table at great length and in public. Once they are felt to have taken shape, and after a few rehearsals, they are summarily staged. But this is in fact merely a beginning. The audience is closely watched, its response to every word and movement solicited and carefully tested by each actor and by the troupe as a whole. The performance evolves; no two shows are quite the same. The play becomes interplay: a jam session driven by a competitive-cooperative improvisation with each participant developing his part as he thinks fit, in exuberant but comradely conversation with his fellows. Drama is the continuation of this dialogue and its extension into the audience. Gradually theatre loses its fixity, becoming more and more dynamic.

This is impressive. First of all, paradoxically, in its sheer Dutch anti-pretentiousness. Bringing about a radical democratisation of theatre relationships, it enables the players to embrace media- and pop-culture and to subvert and subsume them in fusion and confusion with classical culture. A verbal jazz puts across the Medea myth simultaneously in all its versions, from Euripides and Seneca to Pasolini and Heiner Mueller, recreating it as a vast rap. One gains a glimpse of what it would be like to live in culture that was whole, unified in all its historic depth, from ancient Greece to post-modernity, delivered from the usual academic and mediatic mediations, its rifts healed, vibrant and free.

Something of that sort, I think, is what MedEia achieves. The prophecy is unforgettable. ●

Born in South Africa, Donald Moerdijk emigrated as soon as he was able to France, where he studied philosophy and has lived for the past fifty years, most of them teaching language, literature, and cultural studies at an Ecole normale supérieure. He has published a book (*Anti-Development: South Africa and its Bantustans*), as well as articles in France, Italy, and South Africa. Returning to his native land in 1993, he taught for a few years at the University of the Witwatersrand.

