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alt theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

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cultural diversity and the stage

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"Change the World, One Play at a Time."

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Academia and Cultural Diversity

by Edward Little

This issue's contributors are all involved with Canadian universities in capacities ranging from graduate students to teachers. Their research and creative activity call attention to the state of the relationship between academia and culturally diverse arts in Canada. For some time now, a standing "assignment" for our colleges and universities has been to engage with the changing face of performing arts — to recognize (as has our National arts council) that culturally diverse and aboriginal arts are strategic priorities to ensure growth and sustainability. At present, the assignment remains "elective." It is not required by university hiring practices, it is not reflected in student enrolment quotas, and it is not made a priority by our national humanities research council. Those currently engaged with the project, including this issue's contributors, are developing a populist academic discourse aimed beyond the confines of academia. Their strategy: to analyze culturally diverse expression in the historical, theoretical, and political contexts that continue to shape current and emerging expression in Canada's performing arts. A report card for the overall project suggests some progress, with much room for improvement.

On the positive side, we see an increase in the type of work represented by the writers in this issue of *alt.theatre*. This work directly connects to the lived experience of cultural diversity. It acknowledges relationships between competing visions of multiculturalism and the material conditions affecting artists and production in Canada. And it resists the trend towards commodification that diminishes the essential role of performing arts in the debate over the kind of society in which we want to live. Further evidence of progress comes through growing support in our universities. The numbers of people of culturally diverse backgrounds turning to undergraduate and graduate studies and teaching in the performing arts have modestly increased. A similar trend is seen in the numbers of practicing artists employed as full-time faculty, as well as in new research and creative partnerships between faculty members and artists working in the not-for-profit sector. Although limited, these gains are essential first steps in making more significant connections to communities, inspiring potential artists, and ensuring that creative research and analysis are more deeply engaged with the lived experience and *embodied memories* of cultural diversity.

On the negative side, the ratio of culturally diverse undergraduate and graduate students and faculty in the performing arts is far from representative of Canada's demographics, in either the general population or other disciplines. The difficulty of attracting undergraduates to study performing arts, for example, is exacerbated by the lack of representation of cultural diversity on our professional stages, in our curriculum, and among our university teachers. Furthermore, retaining those students who do undertake studies in performing arts is complicated by the intense pressure that many face from parents concerned about the lack of financial stability and career options for professional performing artists.

Yet especially as immigration from non-European cultures increases, so does the need for research and creative activity in the performing arts that will adequately and effectively engage with Canada's increasing cultural diversity and hybridization. The benefits of nurturing deeper relationships between our universities and culturally diverse art and artists seems self-evident. Immigration and hybridization bring new artistic perspectives, new ways of involving new audiences in issues of common concerns, and new disciplinary and interdisciplinary forms. All of this has the potential to re-vitalize performing arts, criticism, and cultural discourse.

But to what degree should we expect publicly funded universities to lead in developing these relationships? To what degree should academic freedom, training in research skills, and tenure also carry the responsibility of making sure that our universities engage with a broad range of arts, artists, and performing arts issues? Universities are uniquely positioned to provide socio-cultural perspective, to situate performing arts within larger cultural movements, and to champion social justice. In training, publication, and creative practice, they can challenge inequities relating to culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, education, and religion. They can offer criticism when art legitimizes unquestioned or unquestionable values. They can champion culturally diverse artists when their communities "close ranks" against them for drawing attention to "private" social injustices. And they can work to make sure that all of us — academics, artists, funding bodies, and audiences — are held to the same rigorous standards of self-examination and accountability that should — if they do not always — characterize all university research.

As of this year, every university in Quebec is operating in deficit. Schools in other provinces appear to be following suit. Yet even in these difficult times, universities must find ways to work with the not-for-profit arts sector to reach out to current and potential audiences to ensure an inclusive vision of cultural diversity within Canadian performing arts — a vision that resists ghettoizing artists and audiences, that denies spectators the role of voyeurs of other culture, and that implicates each and every one as a participant in acts of recognition, remembrance, and freedom of expression.

Erratum:
The article *Banana Boys at the Magnetic North Festival: a Short Commentary for alt. theatre* by Jaswant Guzder (Vol. 4.2/4.3) contained the following errors: the name of the company should have read **fu-GEN Theatre Company** (not fu-GEN Theatre Group), the author of the novel *Banana Boys* is **Terry Woo** (not Timothy Moo), and **Filipino** was inadvertently written as "Philippino." *alt. theatre* regrets these errors and apologizes for any inconvenience.

TAKING RISKS
at the Edmonton Fringe Festival

by Shelley Scott

In an earlier issue of *alt.theatre*, I wrote of the 2003 Edmonton Fringe Theatre Festival that, with 70,000 tickets sold, it is undeniably "a significant cultural and economic phenomenon" (4). In 2005 the big news at the Edmonton Fringe was an endorsement by Oprah Winfrey, who is a significant cultural and economic phenomenon herself! Considering its mention in *Oprah* magazine, the Fringe must certainly be considered to have hit the popular consciousness. The *Oprah* article called the Edmonton festival, which was founded in 1982, "the oldest of the North American fringes" and explained that "[h]alf a million visitors trek annually to enjoy 1,000 engagements, plus street performers, international food booths, and a craft fair" (Barr 56).

According to Festival Director Miki Stricker, "The Fringe is all about risk. Artists take risks artistically and financially by mounting a show at the Fringe. Patrons take risks by going to see shows they know next to nothing about" (6). Of course, some shows take bigger risks than others, and in practice the majority rely on name recognition, stand up comedy, and various shock-value gimmicks to lure in a willing audience. Others aim for something more. Of the shows I saw at the 2005 Edmonton Fringe, I'd like to focus on four in particular that illustrate the kind of work being done to represent cultural diversity and to discuss human rights issues: two one-man shows, a dance/poetry piece, and a new Canadian play by Len Falkenstein.

Bonhoeffer and *Hull Block*: Contrasting One-Man Shows.

> "Not to speak is to speak ... Not to act is to act."
> -Dietrich Bonhoeffer

> "Some changes in Chinatown I don't like. Like Chinafication. The City of Edmonton and other sponsors chinafied Chinatown to make it look more Chinese. ... A red pagoda roof lies on top of a bus shelter. Even all the phone booths have pagoda roofs. Is Chinatown turning into a Disney World version of *Mulan*? ... Do you see why Chinafication is wrong? Just for you, I will become more Chinese or more Asian ... "
> - from *Hull Block* by Norton Mah

To begin with these two one-man plays is to present a study in contrasts. *Bonhoeffer* was written and performed by Peter Krummeck, was directed by Christopher Weare, and originated at the Arena Theatre in Cape Town, South Africa in 2002. *Bonhoeffer* comes with an impressive international pedigree, outlined in the glossy brochure that served as the program. After its development stage in South Africa, it had a world premiere in Washington, DC in commemoration of 9/11. The brochure included a dense page of reverent reviews, including notice that *The Cape Times* rated *Bonhoeffer* one of the top three shows at the 2004 South African National Arts Festival. It also listed the performance schedule for a cross-Canada Fringe festival tour.

During the Apartheid era, writer/actor Peter Krummeck founded ACTS, a reconciliation-through-drama workshop process. Together with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others, he worked "to bring thousands of alienated young people — regardless of race, creed or gender — to a common experience through drama" (Program). Krummeck's work was recognized as "A Gift of Service to the World" by the 1999 Parliament of World Religions. The subject of Krummeck's one-man drama was also an international figure whose religious convictions called him to serve the oppressed of his time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was a Christian theologian who helped Jews escape Germany during World War II. Bonhoeffer admitted to participating in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler and was hanged at the Flossenburg concentration camp in April of 1945. Krummeck's very literate play is set in Bonhoeffer's prison cell and is structured around a series of flashbacks in which the chronicle of Bonhoeffer's career leads inexorably to the moment of his execution.

In direct contrast to the weighty professionalism of *Bonhoeffer*, the other one-man show I want to consider is a very local, very personal story written and performed by Edmontonian Norton Mah as his Fringe debut. *Hull Block*, directed by Matthew S. Pagels, is a rumination on the importance of place to one's sense of identity. The Hull Block is the oldest historical building in Edmonton's Chinatown, and its lapse into neglect and then recent renovation into residences serves as an effective metaphor for the resilience of the Chinese-Canadian community. Mah's childhood memories of the building intertwine with an evocation of his grandmother who lived there. Although she was an important part of her family, the old woman ended her life alone and frightened in a nursing home where no one knew Thoy-san, her Chinese dialect. Canada's assumptions of easy multiculturalism are contrasted by the grim reality of her isolation, and by what Mah rejects as inauthentic "Chinafication," the attempts by city planners to turn a neighbourhood into a sort of theme park. Mah explains, "Sometimes you get a clearer sense of yourself by discovering your identity versus what others think, like Chinafication. I'm not a guy who does martial arts and spouts Confucian isms just because I'm Chinese." Instead, he takes pride in his detailed knowledge of the history of Edmonton in order to demonstrate that Chinatown has been an integral part. As he explains, "When I wrote the play, I really wanted to point out that my family's/my personal history was tied to Edmonton's/Edmonton's Chinatown history."

Norton Mah's play began as part of a Workshop West project to celebrate the Edmonton Centennial, which commissioned local playwrights to create ten-minute pieces inspired by a historical building. The death of Mah's grandmother brought him back to explore *Hull Block* for the first time in twenty years. According to Mah, "I am trying to include the history of the Chinese neighborhood as part of the history of Edmonton ... .if you look at stories coming out of the Edmonton Centennial ... all Edmonton's founding fathers and leaders were white. Also the *Edmonton Journal* ran a piece highlighting 'One hundred Edmontonians of the Century.' Only one Chinese leader was highlighted ... Only if someone dug into the City of Edmonton Archives could they find the history of Edmonton Chinatown."

Mah is also interested in exploring the differences among Chinese-Canadians. As he points out, "Many stories portray Chinese characters [but] they don't specify if the characters are Cantonese/Thoy-san/Hakka, and they don't explore that subculture." Finally, Mah believes that "it's time for the next generation of Chinese-Canadian theatre artists to take up the mantle. We still have veterans like

Marty Chan, Mieko Ouchi, Dennis Foon, Mitch Miyagawa, Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, and Elyne Quan ... and they should continue doing theatre and encouraging us rookies. But we need new artists like me, Stan Woo, Andrea Cheung, because we have new stories to tell or new roles we can play. Also we have a new generation of audience members to tell stories to."

From the international to the local, from impressive production values to a bare bones do-it-yourself aesthetic, and from a professional performance by a commanding figure to the likable engagement of a young student actor, these two one-man shows couldn't be more different. One important commonality between the two shows is the quest for an engaged, empathetic Christianity, an awareness of how one's religious values compel one to behave in the political world. But whereas Bonhoeffer is perhaps almost too remote a figure in the steadfastness of his martyrdom and the removal of historical distance, Norton Mah invites his audience to think deeply about the place where they live right now.

Neruda Nude: International Collaboration

> "It is pointless not to deliver a poem by Pablo Neruda in the nude."
>
> - Octavio Paz

Neruda Nude is a multicultural collaboration devised by The Spicy Theatre Laboratory, the research ensemble of a Calgary-based company called Maple Salsa. According to Artistic Director Javier Vilalta, Maple Salsa Theatre started in 2001, formed by a group of students from the University of Calgary. The focus of the company is to present audiences with international texts that are rarely seen in North America, including, for example, the famous Trilogy by Spanish playwright Federcio Garcia Lorca in May 2004. As Vilalta explains, "It is our belief that North American theatre is secluded from playwrights from around the world (no one can mention a contemporary Chinese, Portuguese, or Russian playwright if you were to ask around)."

In 2004, Maple Salsa started The Spicy Theatre Laboratory as a forum for theatre research. "Although it is our intention to keep producing the work of international playwrights, we also want to create our own works based on international artists of all backgrounds (not only theatre) and other social, political or cultural events that might not be well known to our audience," Vilalta explains.

Neruda Nude, performed by Kristin Eveleigh, Marcy Lannan, Kevin MacDonnell, Derek Paulich, Elan Pratt, Karla Sainz, and Blanca Sanchez, was directed by Vilalta and adapted from the poetry of the late Chilean author Pablo Neruda. The inspiration for the piece came from the above quote by Mexican Nobel Prize-winner Octavio Paz. Vilalta is originally from Mexico City, and upon deciding that the only way to do justice to Neruda's poetry would be to perform it in the nude, he remembered Teatro del Desnudo, a Mexican company dedicated to creating "performances that expose the naked body in its many forms, shapes and possibilities." Collaboration between the two companies allowed for two members of Teatro del Desnudo to perform at the Edmonton Fringe. As Vilalta says, "Their collaboration and their understanding and use of their bodies in the nude was of immense help in the creation of *Neruda Nude*."

Neruda Nude is a rare example of truth in advertising: the cast of five women and two men were indeed completely naked for the majority of the sixty-minute presentation. In addition to guaranteeing an attentive audience, the brave device worked perfectly in drawing the connection between the descriptive, sensual language of the poetry, at times delivered in Spanish, and the human bodies before us, touching and beautiful in their imperfections and grace. According to the program, some of Neruda's most famous poems were banned in the early twentieth century "for their graphic description of the female body, as well as their open appreciation for acts of desire and intimacy" (Program). The company's website (www.maplesalsa.com) describes the show as "a combination of physical theatre, poetry, movement and dance that illustrates the words of the poet in motion." And unlike many shows that have no further life after the Fringe, *Neruda Nude* was scheduled to enjoy a well-deserved run at Calgary's Big Secret Theatre in December of 2005.

Doppelgänger: Behind the Headlines

> "Oil is not just big business; it is the biggest business there is. It not only fuels the engines of a modern industrial state, its by-products are also a mainstay of the pharmaceutical, plastics and several other key industries that are the pillars of major Western economies. This is the sole reason for America's 'interests' in the Persian Gulf region and for that area's 'strategic importance.'"
>
> - Paul William Roberts, *The Flagging Empire*

"Whereas Bonhoeffer is perhaps almost too remote a figure in the steadfastness of his martyrdom and the removal of historical distance, Norton Mah invites his audience to think deeply about the place where they live right now."

Scenes from the Fringe, August 2005. Photos: Bill Tice

> "Course, you couldn't have chosen a better business to get into. I mean, talk about big business, nothing bigger than oil, right? You guys must be raking it in now, eh, with the prices up because of all the instability and the violence and the ... yeah. Yes siree, oil makes the world go round. It must be great to be in oil."
>
> - Chorus 1, *Doppelgänger*

The final piece I want to highlight is a provocative play written and directed by Len Falkenstein, director of drama at the University of New Brunswick. *Doppelgänger* is the latest in a series of plays he has written for Fringe festivals under the umbrella of Theatre Free Radical, and it definitely deserves wider attention. The inventively theatrical staging of the play alone would make it noteworthy, with a

Scene from *Doppelgänger*. Photo: Mike Johnston

"... Smith is something of an extreme example of the type of apathy and complacency that I see in some of my students and writ larger in Canadian society as a whole as regards our complicity in oppression via our connection to the US."

set made up entirely of oil drums in front of a projection screen. The oil drums are in constant use throughout, manipulated by a strong young cast of students and recent graduates, (Nicholas Cole, Seann Murray, Matthew Spinney, and Chelsea Seale), including a memorable musical number in which the cast members actually wear the drums while dancing with their arms and legs sticking out.

The play opened in Halifax in September 2004, and was also performed at Acadia University in Wolfville. The play was revised for a run in Fredericton and again in June 2005 for the Montreal Fringe. The current version has been done for another couple of performances in Fredericton and then finally in Edmonton. Falkenstein observes, "it's fairly clear and not surprising that the play was received with more local relevance in Alberta ... There was obviously much more energy in the audience and a sense of recognition and reaction around the Alberta references ... and also I think surrounding the whole thematic relevance of what Smith and his story represents, which is a very Alberta sort of story and mentality." While he grew up in Saskatchewan, Falkenstein did his PhD at the University of Alberta and taught there before moving to New Brunswick.

In the program note Falkenstein writes,

> There has been no shortage of sensational stories about prisoners in foreign lands of late ... This play began as a response to these stories, the hostage takings in particular. ... While our original goal was simply to explore what and whom to blame for the events surrounding these horrific cases, the play ended up becoming something of a larger meditation on different forms of imprisonment and on the baffling and surreal state of a world in which the binary us/them rhetoric that appears in so many foreign policy pronouncements is contradicted by the subterfuge that happens behind closed doors — a world in which it is actually often more than just a little bit difficult to tell us from them and to know exactly where you stand and who you are. (Program)

With the use of two Chorus members and many slide projections, *Doppelgänger* charts the story of a character named Adam Smith, from his childhood growing up in rural Cochrane, Alberta, through his rise in the oil business in Calgary, to his assignment to oversee the construction of a pipeline in an unnamed Middle Eastern nation. When Smith is taken hostage and tortured, the play spirals into surreal and darkly comic scenes that examine the politics of oil. The Insurgent tells Smith, "Your government will refuse [to leave], of course. They will issue a statement proudly proclaiming that they don't negotiate with people like us. That the international community must always refuse to give in to the demands of terrorists. And so you will die. But until then you have a few days. To ready yourself. Maybe to reflect on what brought you here to our country, where you are not welcome. And whether you are truly so guiltless as you say."

I asked Dr. Falkenstein how culpable he feels his main character is in his situation, and he responded,

> I think I mean to suggest that he's a hapless dupe in the sense that he is the product of a type of thinking, or maybe not-thinking is a more correct way of putting it, that simply accepts unquestioningly the prevailing views of the dominant voices that surround him regarding the goodness, beneficence, rightness, etc. of free enterprise, the American way, Western liberal values, etc., especially as coloured and shaped by a right-wing, conservative culture. ... Smith is something of an extreme example of the type of apathy and complacency that I see in some of my students and writ larger in Canadian society as a whole as regards our complicity in oppression via our connection to the US. On one level, he's someone who wants little more than the easy life that the oil wealth that surrounds him can readily provide him, and he just wants to take the path of least resistance to that life without having to think about where it comes from or its consequences.

Further, I asked if Adam Smith's complicity, his guilt, is his doppelgänger in the play, and Falkenstein responded: " ... of course he can't shut all doubts out completely, and at some level he knows that he is participating in a dubious enterprise, which fires the sense of unease he carries his whole life but can't define. So he's not totally a dupe. He has the capacity to recognize the questionableness of his actions and involvements and to change things ... But in the fashion of classic tragedy, he only comes to recognize these things after it is too late."

Doppelgänger is indeed a timely play. In a recent *Globe and Mail* article, journalist Paul William Roberts points out, " ... a cynic might say the Bush administration used the September, 2001, attacks as an excuse to pursue its thwarted plan for a pipeline taking oil from the Caspian through Afghanistan to the Pakistani port of Karachi" (F4). According to Roberts, the real issue is control over the pipeline, a battle between the US and China that is being played out today in Afghanistan and Iraq. In *Doppelgänger*, Adam Smith and his company will do anything to build and control a pipeline in the unnamed nation where the play is set. For the audience, the questions start to mount: Who is Smith really working for, and how far has he gone to get the oil? Is Smith really an American CIA agent who has committed atrocities? Or is he what he claims to be, a deliberately uninformed oilman from Alberta every bit as complicit in the same agenda? Which is his identity and which his doppelgänger?

By the time Adam Smith is buried in the desert inside his own pipeline, plaintively singing "Don't Fence Me In," the audience must consider the simple Alberta farm boy in a whole new light. As Smith says near the end of the play, "But the thing is, even if I wasn't actually the one who did the things, I was still part of ... But maybe the bigger thing is that even if I'm not the one who did those things, I could have been. That I could have been a lot of different people. And maybe if I'd realized that earlier I'd have ended up being someone else." Oil is a relevant subject made even more so when played in Alberta, to an audience made up of people who can identify "Adam Smith" in themselves and their families. As reviewer Juliann Wilding put it, quoting a line from the play, "[W]ho is more dangerous, the ones who believe too much or the ones who don't believe in anything at all? What really happens when you choose the path of least resistance?" (22).

The path of least resistance is the path taken most frequently at the Edmonton Fringe Festival, perhaps by most theatre in Canada. But plays that take creative risks, like *Neruda Nude*, and political ones, like *Doppelgänger*, follow a different route.

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Collective Differences in MT Space

by Ric Knowles

Above - Watching TV: l-r: Athena Guy, Badih Abouchakra, Nicholas Cumming, Colleen MacPherson, Carolina Miranda. Photo: Dwight Storring

Not all collective creation in Canada derives from Theatre Passe Muraille's sociological or historical traditions of *The Farm Show* and *1837*, The Anna Project's feminist *This Is for You, Anna*, or the Eugenio Barba-inspired work of Primus Theatre. In Kitchener, Ontario, the MT Space announces in its title a mixed lineage that homophonically encompasses both Peter Brook's "empty space" and "Multicultural Theatre," for which the initials "MT" stand. This company, unaware of earlier Canadian traditions of collective creation, is nevertheless setting out to change the face of Canadian theatre by collectively forging new intercultural languages and forms.

Collective creation has assumed a variety of processes and purposes in Canada since the early 1970s, and has resulted in a variety of theatrical forms. These range from the early, anti-hierarchical collectives of the Mummers troupe, through the anti-patriarchal feminist collectives of the 1980s, through collaborative creation across performance disciplines in the 1990s, to today's "devised theatre," which attempts to reconcile the relative authorities of body and text. All these modes have in some sense been about resisting monological authorities—almost always textual, usually colonial, and often patriarchal—but they have also all tended to work from the assumption or construction of a unified, if collective, position from which to look at the world.

The MT Space experiment in collective creation shares much with these earlier collectives, but it emerges from some significantly different traditions, consciously works with difference *within* the ensemble, and works to constitute different audiences that reflect and shape a different Canada. The show I'll focus on is *The Season of Immigration to the West*, first performed in June 2005 and remounted in a new version in January 2006. Like the early Passe Muraille collectives, this show focuses on the local and on groups that have been underrepresented on Canada's stages; it too uses "poor theatre" techniques—a bare stage, a minimum of props, and lots of doubling of actors who play everything from airplanes and elevators to showerheads, shopping carts, and even Niagara Falls; and it too employs an episodic structure and presentational style. And like many 1990s collaborations, it is multidisciplinary, using live music, movement, and even live painting. And finally, like most recent "devised theatre," it is fundamentally movement based.

What sets the work of the MT Space and its artistic director, Majdi Bou-Matar, apart is, first, the conscious construction of a company based on difference *within* the collective, difference that it shares with the multicultural Kitchener-Waterloo community to and for whom it speaks; and second, the conscious bringing together of actors from different cultures to forge new, explicitly "multicultural," or "intercultural" dramaturgical forms. Finally, this work is done under the leadership—not of a Western director such as Peter Brook or Eugenio Barba, who have been accused of "containing" difference within a Western-dominated universalism—but of a Beirut-trained recent Lebanese immigrant to Canada, Majdi Bou-Matar, as director, and a 1994 immigrant from Sarajevo, Jasminka Klacar, as dramaturge. Accepting the myth of Canada as "a nation built by immigrants," but putting pressure on the implications of that myth, Bou-Matar sees *The Season of Immigration* as an early stage in a long-term goal of developing, through the MT Space as "theatre laboratory," an "aesthetics of immigration" that might be peculiarly Canadian in a contemporary and historical context in which immigration is understood to be *constitutive* of the nation[1] —much to the dismay of its First Peoples.

Bou-Matar's work with the MT space asks: How might a different Canada be dif-

MT Space Mandate
Devised by Majdi Bou-Matar with Andrew Houston

The MT Space has been created to explore cultural experience between people, their histories, and their forms of expression in performance. Drawing upon the wealth of multicultural identities living in the Waterloo region, the MT Space aims to increase activity between performance artists of many disciplines, cultural orientations, and spaces of practice. Through theatre, various traditions and cultural orientations will meet in a space of formal innovation, to initiate new signs of identity and forms of theatrical expression, in the act of defining community itself. (Bou-Matar, "Creating" 106).

[1] Information about Majdi Bou-Matar and the MT Space, unless otherwise indicated, is from Bou-Matar, Personal Interview.

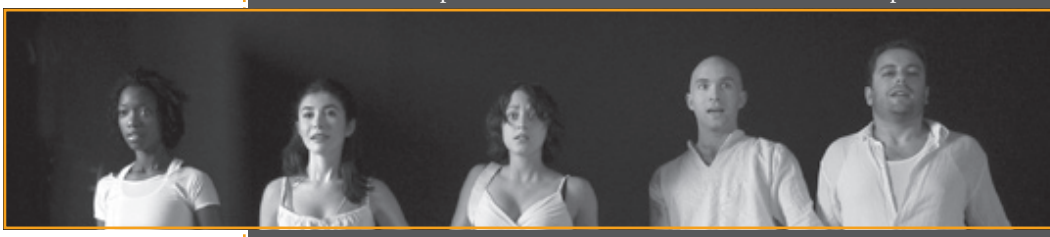
ferently performed and dramaturged? How might a less exclusive understanding of community be forged in our theatres? How might the visible, audible, and other(ed) minorities who are beginning to constitute the majority of the population of many Canadian cities be better represented both on stage and in the audience?

Majdi Bou-Matar himself immigrated to Canada in 2003 after having received his formal training in Western theatre—Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Michael Chekhov, Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, and Strasburg—at The Lebanese and Lebanese American Universities in Beirut, where he was taught mainly by graduates of Moscow academies in the former Soviet Union. He graduated in 1997, and his subsequent work in both Lebanon and Canada is informed by that training. He indicates, however, that his work is also deeply informed by the profound theatricality of Lebanese traditions not officially defined as "theatre" (a Western form relatively new to the Arab world). These include the ritual practices of mourning, celebration, chanting, story-telling, and modes of display at funerals and weddings, of which he has detailed memories from his childhood. They also include the ritual practices of various religions in the Middle East. He vividly recalls attending the Shiite "Ashura," a ten-day ritual reenactment of the battle in 680AD in which Al-Husein (cousin of the prophet) was abandoned by his people, and remembers taking the bus for sixteen hours from Lebanon to Baghdad and driving for three more hours to visit Karbala in Iraq, where the battle took place, and on further to the holy Shiite city of Najaf. Neither religious nor sectarian himself, he also counts among the influences on his work the Haj (Sunni) pilgrimage to Mecca, with its highly theatrical patterns and programs of movement. He considers these religious rituals—both Shiite and Sunni—to be fundamentally theatrical (and fundamental to an emerging Arabic theatre), in spite of the fact that most poetry, song, and other forms of representation are not encouraged in Islam.

"Bou-Matar's work with the MT space asks: How might a different Canada be differently performed and dramaturged?"

Finally, Bou-Matar's practice is deeply informed by his work as a participating artist over three years in the Afro-Arab Centre in Tunis, a multicultural project that involved select participants from a range of Arab Middle-Eastern and Central and North African nations attempting to forge a distinctly "Afro-Arab" theatre from a range of diverse traditions, practices, bodies, and languages—languages that were not shared among all participants. The method included two hours daily of intense physical training and four hours of theatrical exercises, followed by many hours of improvisation and the collective building, structuring, and framing of scenes, and the eventual staging and touring of a show. The Tunis experience was fresh in his mind when he moved permanently to Canada in late 2003, after a third year of workshops at the Afro-Arab Center, and saw in his new country of "official multiculturalism" an opportunity to extend that intercultural work in a new context.

The participants he assembled in the collective that produced *The Season of Immigration* share many of the Western fundamentals of Bou-Matar's formal theatre training, but they filter them through different cultural backgrounds and embodied memories. Dramaturge Jasminka Klacar came to Canada in 1994 from Sarajevo, where she worked as an artistic director and dramaturge at the Belgrade Drama Theatre. A certain amount of "additional writing" on the project was done during the rehearsal period by Anglo-Canadian playwright Gary Kirkham. The actors in the final version of the show included one immigrant from the US (Andrew Lakin); one second-generation Trinidadian Canadian with ongoing connections to the Caribbean (Athena Guy); one 2003 immigrant from Brazil who has studied in São Paulo and Toronto (Carolina Miranda); one Lebanese immigrant with training in Beirut similar to that of Bou-Matar, plus further work in France, Jordan, Tunisia, and the US (Badih Abouchakra); one Canadian-born actor with experience in dance, forum theatre, contact improvisation, and Colway-style community theatre (Tanya Williams); and one actor who simply identifies as a recent graduate of the University of Waterloo (Nicholas Cumming). Added to this mix were two onstage musicians, Nick Storring, Canadian-trained but with extensive knowledge of the musical forms of a variety of cultures, and Priyanka Sinha, an Indian- and British-trained specialist in North Indian classical vocal music. Finally, the company included onstage at each performance an Iranian-born painter, Aziz Yousefi, who spent twenty-two years in refugee camps in southern Iraq before coming to Canada to work in a factory and paint in the evenings. Throughout the show, Yousefi painted a sunset on a huge canvas upstage left and was occasionally addressed by the actors. His own story was briefly told, without explicit reference to him, in the 2005 version of the show.



This group gathered for an intensive seven-week theatre workshop, armed with twenty-three written and recorded stories of immigration to Canada assembled from responses to an ad inviting contributions that was widely circulated in the Waterloo region. These stories told of the personal experiences of immigrants from India, Iran, Lebanon, Israel, Kenya, the former Yugoslavia, the former Czechoslovakia, Poland, Germany, Holland, Ireland, England, Guyana, Columbia, and the US (Bou-Matar, "MT" 7). The company was also armed with support from the Canada and Ontario Arts Councils, the Laidlaw and Trillium Foundations, the cities of Kitchener and Waterloo and several community groups, including the Kitchener and Waterloo Community Foundation, *Cross Cultures Magazine*, and the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre. Rehearsals were held in the former shoe factory that houses the MT Space, along with a number of other offices under the um-

Stepping l-r: Athena Guy, Carolina Miranda, Colleen MacPherson, Nicholas Cumming, Badih Abouchakra. Photo: Dwight Storring

brella of the "Waterloo Regional Arts Council," in a working-class, formerly industrial area not far from Kitchener's downtown. The space consists of a single room with office and computers at one end and a playing space opposite—a small black box, what passes for an empty space in Western theatre.

But this space is not empty in Brook's sense; rather it is "MT," the peculiar vacuum created by what Bou-Matar sees (citing Neil Bissoondath) as a stifling multicultural policy and practice in Canada, exemplified in the Waterloo Region by the annual Multicultural Festival held in Victoria Park, at which different ghettoized cultural groups are invited once a year to display to one another and to the dominant culture their exotic folklore and "ethnic" foods.

The creation workshop followed the process Bou-Matar had experienced in Tunis. Physical work and theatrical exercises pushed actors to discover and relax into their differently enculturated bodies and rhythms. More focused improvisations were used to develop scenes and structures emerging from the stories of immigration that the company had received from the community and the stories contained within the embodied cultural memories, rituals, and habits of the company members themselves.[2] These scenes were framed dramaturgically in response to Bou-Matar's wish to ask specific questions about the language, form, and content of a potentially new "Canadian intercultural or multicultural theatre" (Bou-Matar, "Creating" 106). "The only way to answer these questions," argues dramaturge Jasminka Klacar, "was choosing a dramaturgical approach that imitates the immigration process itself":

> The dramaturgical flow should resemble the flow of immigrants. The rhythm of the show should be similar to the pulse in immigrants' everyday lives as they arrive in Canada. It's a rhythm of excitement, joy, hope and dreams transformed, with time or suddenly, to fear, helplessness, hopelessness and desperation, then switching back to the previous conditions and so on. It is like a pendulum swinging us back and forth against our desires and despite our actions. (qtd. in Bou-Matar, "Creating" 106-7)

The company's creation process was framed from the outset by a chronological structuring of the immigration experience that Klacar had extrapolated from the stories gathered from the community—a structure that survived more-or-less intact through to the production itself. This involved the arrival in Canada and the initial "honeymoon" stage, confrontations with language barriers, the complications and catch-22s around gaining appropriate (or any!) employment, parenting issues and generational conflict, and a final internal conflict between "going up in the world" and "being dragged down." The structure had the virtue of providing a spine connecting the play's vignettes; it also, however, tended to flatten some of the complexity of the Canadian immigrant community, in which *different* "seasons" of immigration overlap, new immigrants encounter second- and third-generation immigrants, and many of the show's dominant "Canadian" venues—from supermarkets and the CN tower to employers and employment agencies—are themselves staffed with immigrants from a variety of cultures.

Nevertheless, within this framework Bou-Matar introduced improvisational exercises that were designed to put the actors under pressure and into circumstances that would push them beyond the initial clichés—those that first emerge in improv, he feels, because of the global hegemony of Hollywood. Put under such pressure, he suggests, the actors' culturally coded behaviours—the deep structures of culture—emerge and reveal themselves in culturally specific patterns and rhythms. Specific gestures, movements, and moments that surface are often "pushed," played with, repeated, distilled, or extended, and they are later reintroduced into situations or "scripts" drawn from the immigrant stories with which the process began—or from the actors' own stories. Similarly, these same gestures, movements, and moments might be given to *different* actors in such a way that they are denaturalized, alienated, and made visible. This refusal to allow actors exclusive "ownership" over their gestural languages, instinctive behaviour, and embodied memory is part of a transformational practice at the heart of the process' interculturalism, as actors learn to experience what it means to inhabit the body of an "other" and as audiences come to recognize their own encoded assumptions about who is allowed to represent the universal and who, traditionally, is not. In the process the bodies of both the creator and re-creator of the behaviours are potentially transformed, rather than merely represented or reproduced.

"Audiences come to recognize their own encoded assumptions about who is allowed to represent the universal and who, traditionally, is not."

An example of how one scene came about may illustrate some aspects of the process. At one point there seemed to be a need for a scene in the early "honeymoon" section to deal with shopping and consumerism. Writer Gary Kirkham supplied a draft script consisting of sketches in which one couple confronted the baffling array of (non)choice in the canned tomato aisle of the supermarket, another couple were wafted home to the Caribbean by the sight and smell of mangoes, and another debated the merits of Uncle Ben's Instant Rice. Trying out the scene in rehearsal, the company improvised ways of representing the supermarket experience using only their bodies, They finally hit upon a movement in which the women, bent forward at the waist and extending their arms to form the basket of a shopping cart, skittered backward, "pushed" by the men, who mimed loading items from imaginary shelves into the "baskets" formed by their partners' arms while moving through imaginary aisles.[3] At this stage the scene was already clever and entertaining. But Bou-Matar, pushing the gesture of bending to form the shopping cart, noted its resemblance to a Middle-Eastern posture of prayer. As the scene developed, a brief prologue was added that enriched the scene's meanings immeasurably:

> In my village the largest building was the temple...
> You could see it from anywhere in town. But here?
> The largest building is the Zehr's Super Centre.

As the scene was finally rounded out, the men returned their shopping carts to the rack, "stacking" the women/shopping carts (and retrieving their quarters), at which point evocative Indian vocal music kicked in from Priyanka Sinha, and the three women/shopping carts rose together, their arms held from their sides in graduated extensions, forming the perfect image of a six-armed Indian goddess—returning us hauntingly to the temple of the scene's prologue, and brilliantly rounding out its commentary on the temple of consumerism.

The Season of Immigration was performed at the Registry Theatre (capacity 143), an affordable subsidized "black box" space at the heart of the city's downtown used by many community groups, with programming that includes contemporary dance, music, dub poetry, and the like that draws a mixed audience from the city's downtown and arts communities. The first staging, for two evenings in June 2005, was primarily to an audience of those who had submitted their stories, along with their friends and families and a smattering of others. Admission was free. The second, running for a week in January

[2]For a discussion of the relationship between ritual, habit, performance, embodiment, and social memory, see Connerton.

[3]The gendering of this staging here is indicative of the production's overall inability to address the gendering of the immigration experience—which for some cultural communities is a massively important issue, but which at the same time is culturally sensitive in terms of reception. The production was also overwhelmingly heteronormative. Both of these issues remain significant challenges for future productions at the MT Space as the company increasingly wins the trust of its constituents.

2006, drew a more general and markedly multicultural audience attracted by word of mouth, a favourable review in the Kitchener-Waterloo Record (Elliott), and ticket prices ranging from fourteen to eighteen dollars.

Andrew Houston has written an illuminating review article about the production in which he focuses on space, tracing the show's "non-places" (in anthropologist Marc Augé's formulation) of airports, Super Centres, assembly lines, fitness clubs, televisionland, and of course, for immigrants, Canada itself. Indeed much of the production's impact had to do with the filling, shaping, and reshaping of immigrant space, as six white-clad bodies carrying white suitcases negotiated (and represented) customs, immigration, moving sidewalks, and baggage carousels; took their first Canadian showers; visited Niagara Falls and the CN Tower; tried to find work; quarreled with their spouses or children; and attended good-luck/crackpot/pot-luck suppers, where you're invited for dinner but you have to bring (what?) food. As this account suggests, much of the tone, as reviewer Lorie Elliott wrote, was light, the pace was fast, and the few representations of serious hardship, racism, conflict, and inequity were "poignant" rather than incisive. There was no systemic critique within the show of immigration or multicultural policy, though Bou-Matar has performed such a critique elsewhere ("MT" 3), and as Bou-Matar himself suggests, even the ironic citations of folkloric, "festival" multiculturalism towards the play's conclusion were softened in order not to give offence.

Perhaps surprisingly, the show presented few real distinctions among the immigrants it represented, tending to privilege the sameness of the shared experiences of immigration over their cultural differences, and tending to construct a single "multicultural community" rather than alliances across difference—what Bou-Matar calls "harmony and not necessarily homogeny" ("MT" 3). Indeed, part of the power of the show rested in the uniformity of dress and experience of the actors, "reminiscent," as Houston noted, "of a lack of identity," even as the constant state of movement suggested shared anxiety (112). And the show's final sequences, in which the image of the immigrants "going up in the world" (literally, in an elevator) was set against their struggles to not be dragged down—largely by their own pasts, seen as cultural baggage rather than markers of cultural identity (the white suitcases in the end being emptied of rainbows of colourful folkloric fabrics).

"Perhaps surprisingly, the show presented few real distinctions among the immigrants it represented, tending to privilege the sameness of the shared experiences of immigration over their cultural differences."

It is always difficult to talk about reception, to determine to what extent the processes of production leave traces in the meanings produced by audiences. Beyond evidence of "success" drawn from box-office receipts and reviews—and on these grounds the show was certainly successful—the least nuanced evidence of impact comes from the visible make up of the audience. But it is on this level that Bou-Matar makes a justifiable claim to significant success. Prior to founding the MT Space, he had had discussions with theatre practitioners in the region and was told it was not possible to reach its immigrant communities: they don't go to the theatre (Interview). An earlier production at MT Space, *The Three Legged Horse*, about Vaslav Nijinsky, seemed to bear this out: its audience was the familiar middle-class Caucasian one that constitutes the overwhelming majority of patrons at most theatres in Canada. But *The Season of Immigration* was different,[4] and it reflected Bou-Matar's original goal. Not only was the audience not predominantly Anglo-Canadian, it was not predominantly from any single, pre-defined cultural group. If *Season of Immigration* set out, within the context of a community-friendly performance space at the heart of a multicultural, working-class city, to employ a process and devise a form of theatre that went beyond multicultural ghettoization to be genuinely intercultural, in the end it produced a show that seemed to succeed in *constituting* its audience as a unified multicultural community whose members felt that "we've seen our story" (Bou-Matar, Interview).

Majdi Bou-Matar feels that he is in the early stages of his experiment with the "aesthetics of immigration" and the dramaturgy of multiculturalism. He feels that the "theatre laboratory" that is the MT Space has so far only produced provisional results, and it is certainly true that there are depths and complexities of both form and content still to be mined. But if he and his colleagues can continue to negotiate with the multicultural community that they represent (in both senses of the word), if they can continue to tell their stories and contribute to their constitution as a unified community based on the recognition of difference, they will have made a very significant contribution to the community that is Canadian theatre. By constituting a company out of a diverse group of actors in the community, by drawing on an embodied diversity of performance training, traditions, and expressive modes, and by giving back to people their own stories transformed, they have already provided a model of how to discover and create elusive new audiences for theatre here and now.

Notes: Thanks to Majdi Bou-Matar for his generosity in answering my many questions, and thanks to Christine Bold for her advice on an earlier draft. A version of this paper was presented at the "Collective Beginnings, Alternative Creations" conference at Theatre Passe Muraille, 6-8 March 2006.

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[4] This is based on my own experience of seeing the sold-out show on 27 January 2006, and on information from Bou-Matar that that evening's house was representative.

"Might Is Right"

Do you have the right
To kill children
Of Lebanon
To save your children
From the rockets of Hezbollah?

Do you have the right
To rain bombs indiscriminately
On terrorized civilians
Caught in the conflict
Where innocent citizens are pawns
Of global politics
And of people asserting
That it is their god given right
To occupy land
That belongs to mankind?

Raining rockets and bombs
On terrorized population
Non Jews and Jews alike
Is not an answer to bring harmony
As the might of USA
Forces us to believe.

Jayanta Guha. Chicoutimi. July 25, 2006

Jayanta Guha is a Professor Emeritus of Earth Sciences at L'Université du Québec à Chicoutimi

Writing, Righting, "Riting"

The Scrubbing Project Re-members a New "Nation" and Reconfigures Ancient Ties

by Jill Carter Photography Courtesy of Nir Bareket

Genesis Overture: The "White Noise" of Creation

The Scrubbing Project begins on a sound emerging out of the darkness. Flats and sharps commingle to become a melody, out of which another begins to take shape, commingling with the first to form yet another, and another, and another, until the darkness fairly screams with a cacophony of discordant rhythms, competing melodies, and voices struggling to fashion balance, harmony, and clarity out of aural chaos.

"In the beginning," an Auntie once told me, "there was only darkness; and then Creator filled the darkness with sound – like 'white noise'." She held a hide shaker she was cradling close to my ear and let it whisper to me. I remember that I closed my eyes. I closed my eyes tight and held my breath as the seeds inside it chattered louder and louder. My heart was pounding with a joyous excitement; and there in the darkness, engulfed in the sounds of Auntie's shaker, I felt myself poised on the brink of something vast and eternal. In the darkness behind my tightly squeezed lids, I knew that something was beginning again for me, just as it had begun in the beginning of the beginning of the beginning....

And then, there is light. Upon a curtained stage, bathed in shadowy luminescence, we can just make out three winged figures who occupy Star World. It is one of these who, with *deliberate and self-conscious ceremony*, removes the veil that separates the audience from the world of the stage. In so doing, she links the world of spirit with the material world, links the temporal with the eternal, and makes the unseen apparent. As if to ensure our right-reception of this momentous act, a disembodied voice, the rich, dark, female Voice of Creation, announces, *"The veil is falling into worlds of blood. The threshold is broken, broken into bits"* (Turtle Gals). And there we are, in the half-light, "[s]pun from dust and dried butterfly wings. Wispy, filmy delicate" (Turtle Gals), we are poised on the brink of something — something momentous, vast, and eternal. There we are, *together* in the half-light; and something is beginning...

Once Upon a Time in the West

Once upon a time in the West, the human body performed its supplications to the gods, its understanding of metaphysical directives, its affirmation of communal relationships and responsibilities, its recognition of the natural cycles of life, and its gratitude for the gift of life and the gifts that sustain that life in ceremony. The forty-four extant scripts and the surviving *theatrons* that provide us with a window into the "golden age" of Attic dramaturgy testify also to the ceremonial cycles, of which the theatrical experience was only a part. The Attic "theatre festival" pulled the isolated individual away from quotidian concerns and integrated him with his fellows as a participant in a collective project of worship and witnessing. Significant historical events and the troubling questions and moral dilemmas arising therefrom were remembered and re-remembered yearly that the people might remember themselves and that the decisions they implemented to direct a course of action, which would affect future generations, might be directed by ancestral knowledge and informed by an organic understanding of the intricate interdependencies within which the Creation sustains itself.

Once upon a time in the West, man outgrew his world, his community, and his gods. He set out to "discover" a new world; and to assuage his loneliness, once he had broken old ties, he "discovered" divinity within himself. The theatrical experience became a celebration of the individual, self-created, isolated, and supreme — responsible to nobody and to no thing save the "god" within. But while the secular, post-modern condition of deconstruction, fragmentation, and discontinuity reflects an isolated, interior experience that has emerged out of technological and scientific (in the broadest sense of this word) advances, out of diasporas, changing economies, and shifting political constructs for some, for others — less privileged — the post-modern condition is a *disease*, which has been *imposed* upon us and upon our communities, and which compromises the health of the communal body even as it disrupts the minds and spirits of its individuals.

Apocalyptic Interlude: Culture *Interupptus*

Globally, the Aboriginal experience continues to be an experience of disruption and discontinuity. Residential schools, language suppression, religious prohibition, relocation, containment on reservations, environmental damage, the destruction of traditional lifeways and sustainable economies, and the removal of children from their communities have created an immense lacuna that divides the generations and that has severed many contemporary individuals from the lands, languages, and lifeways that are their birthright. Urban mixed-bloods, like myself, are born into cosmopolitan anonymity and live estranged from their families, communities, and traditions from both sides of their family tree. Urban full-bloods, who have been adopted out, live in like estrangement. We often believe ourselves to be unique in this — unique and *alone*. But we are part of an ever-growing nation of "Stone People,"[1] many of whom walk as unwelcome "guests" on the lands of our grandfathers. Our stories may rise from towers of glass and steel and they may find their invocation in the language of loss, but these stories are the "containers" for our lives and those of our ancestors and our grandchildren.

For many of us, the public stage affords the first accessible *centre* around which we (as erstwhile isolated strangers) may gather to share these stories, to re-member[2] our-

1 I borrow this term from Nokomis Lillian McGregor. As an Anishinaabe, urban Elder, she has been charged with bringing the land and its teachings to those of us (mixed-bloods or full-bloods) who live in this city (Toronto) and walk its concrete paths.

2 David Savran has used this term to signify "the piecing together of what has been lost" (589). But much of "what has been lost" to Indigenous peoples globally has not simply been misplaced, forgotten, or discarded; these things (language, relations, lifeways, ceremonies, familial and communal memory) have been forcibly severed from us, decimating our communities and fragmenting individuals physically, spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

selves and to recover our communities. Hence, the development of aesthetic strategies that work to "consecrate" commercial spaces and to translate secular diversions into sacred acts is a vital undertaking in the evolution of a body of dramatic literature that speaks to the recovery, remembrance, revitalization and reintegration of *all* Aboriginal peoples, regardless of their proximity to their biological families and traditional territories.

Re-Genesis Project: Re-Inscribing the Circle and Drawing Us In

To this body, Jani Lauzon, Monique Mojica, and Michelle St. John — as Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble — have contributed their groundbreaking production, *The Scrubbing Project*. Drawing upon their own mixed backgrounds[3], these creators/performers explore personal histories, remember essential cultural traditions, and imagine how the expression of these might be transformed that they might better inform the lives of this generation of Stone People, now living in a world greatly transformed from the world of our ancestors. With *The Scrubbing Project*, Turtle Gals has invented a container — and imagined a ceremony with which to frame it — that unabashedly celebrates our dualities, that suggests a methodology for their integration and balance, and that locates (and locates us around) an essential centre. In the fire-storm of debate raging through our communities, in which blood quantum, language facility, band membership, and traditional knowledge and praxis are alternatively held up or dismissed as authenticators of identity, there is one essential truth that unites Aboriginal peoples everywhere — regardless of skin-tone, racial purity, cultural participation, or the places we call "home": How Indian are we? "Indian enough to be dead" (Turtle Gals).

The Spiderwoman Tradition of Storyweaving and its Evolution: A Processual Exercise in Continuity

Dualities within dualities permeate the *Project* as the performers slip from the metaphysical plane to the vaudevillian carnival (preserved upon a two-dimensional plane between the worlds of spirit and flesh) to poly-temporal realms of material existence. Under the direction of Muriel Miguel (co-founder of Spiderwoman Theater), a multiplicity of classic comedy routines, hit-television iconography, popular music, and survivors' testimony is embodied and juxtaposed within a complex weave to expose and confront the reductive and destructive "traditions" that continue to exercise a profound impact upon the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people. The methodology of storyweaving, which discovers and manifests the interconnections between seemingly disparate thought, story, and aesthetic expression, has been authored and developed over three decades by Miguel (Haugo 238) who is Mojica's aunt. Hence, the *Project*'s dramaturgical underpinnings are part of Mojica's genealogical legacy and reflect themselves in this work as part of Turtle Gals' artistic legacy. But it is important to recognize that this tradition of aesthetic methodology continues to evolve with its second generation of performers to meet the needs of its latter-day audience: As Indigenous nations around the world gather to collaborate within a collective project of recovering, re-membering, and re-righting, so too Indigenous artists gather to collectively recover and share traditional knowledge and to develop aesthetic strategies and processual models, upon which to author significant contributions to the canon of literary resistance within the greater project of decolonization:

For over a decade, Mojica and Miguel have been working with Cree playwright/director Floyd Favel Starr along with other Native performers (including Lauzon and St. John) and ceremonial practitioners to develop a performance methodology rooted in the traditional and ceremonial praxis of contemporary Aboriginal peoples without indulging in literal reproductions of ceremony and thereby violating our cultures of origin (70). Together, these artists have developed a process whereby they locate and embody the spiritual core of particular ceremonial elements (i.e. creation stories, songs, or dances) upon which to construct a "score of actions." Upon this "score," new performative containers may be authored, which translate sacred acts, rendering them appropriate for the public stage without distorting their purpose or degrading their efficacy (Favel Starr 70). Since a colonized people must remember itself within a multiplicity of cultural sources, Turtle Gals has extended this process to distill the murky waters of religious syncretism by navigating

Lover's Lament (l to r): Monique Mojica, Michelle St. John, Jani Lauzon. Photo Courtesy of Nir Bareket.

a legacy of Judeo-Christian memory and tradition that has come to overlay and obfuscate the original teachings and lifeways of Indigenous peoples globally. Furthermore, the ensemble utilizes this process to deconstruct and translate popular traditions of aesthetic expression through which Native peoples have been "understood" and through we have come to "understand" ourselves.

Locating Dis-Ease and Re-Righting Wrong Rites

The *Project*'s central metaphor emerged out of conversations among the ensemble members around the obscene rituals of self-erasure, which so many of us are compelled to enact (*Program*). Thematically, the play deals with scrubbing as the ideological foundation and facilitating action behind a global history of genocide and as a characteristic behaviour of its survivors. Branda X's story of bathing in bleach to lighten her skin is personal but not anomalous; so, while the bathtub scene is presented with excruciating detail and power, it is presented as a singular example amongst infinite possible variations of (what has come to be for too many of us) a common-place "rite of passage," the essential spirit of which is ill-begotten, tenacious, and *Wendigo*. This *dis-ease* (which attacks and disaffects the mind and spirit before turning itself upon the body) manifests itself in myriad guises throughout the *Project* — in Branda's self-inflicted scars and in the scars inflicted upon her by her spouse, in Esperanza's rejection of food and her womb's rejection of the babies she conceives, and in Ophelia's resolve to remain a child forever. Considered in all its manifestations, this affliction seems too pervasive, too deeply entrenched for successful "treatment." Indeed, as I witness each new remembered manifestation on Turtle Gals' stage, my own dis-ease begins to mount, because this *Project* does not simply evoke mood, invite identification, or solicit sympathy. The performers demand my participation in the conversation: They remember that *we might remember together* — "I add my breath to your breath" (Turtle

[3] Mojica and St. John share a Native and Ashkenazi heritage, while Lauzon, in reference to her Métis and Scandinavian heritage, iro nically identifies herself as a "Finndian" (Turtle Gals).

Gals). And they orchestrate the silences, through which individual memory, borne upon breathless sobs or stifled groans, borne upon song or laughter, borne upon a sigh of affirmation or a startled cry of recognition — borne upon the co-mingling of breath — rises to join the canon of communal history: Their disease is my disease... is **our** disease. And the dis-ease is overwhelming. But Turtle Gals has not created their *Project* to remember personal affliction or to evoke the dis-ease of the afflicted. It is not enough to bring us into confrontation with the animus of despair. Strong medicine is required to eradicate it: This is, after all, a *scrubbing* project! And to this end,

Marx Brothers (floor l to r): Monique Mojica, Jani Lauzon (standing) Michelle St. John. Photo Courtesy of Nir Bareket.

Turtle Gals marries traditional knowledge with contemporary methodology to render *medicine* from an aesthetic phenomenon:

Stripped of its variants, embodied as ritual and *repeated as a central litany*, collective experience is reduced to a harsh choral refrain ("Erase, deface"). The performers punctuate each intonation with a stylized wiping of the face (as if to obliterate their features) and follow through with a sharp, reactive head-turn repeated six times. Embodied collectively and severally throughout the show, this "signature bit" identifies seemingly anomalous acts ("I fucked up again" [Turtle Gals]) as ritualistic undertakings that perversely link the full-blood to the mixed-blood, link our nations, and link Indigenous peoples in six cardinal directions[4]. *How Indian are we? Indian enough to be dead*. How do we "scrub away" hegemonic mythologies that pervade our psyches, paralyze our will, and compel us to repeat these obscene rituals? How do we purge ourselves of our souls' dis-ease? Once the destructive animus has been isolated and exposed, the *Project* begins to reconfigure the sites of its genesis into sites of right-remembrance, wherein our origins, resistance and survival are documented and celebrated so that they might support and sustain us.

Framed within a ceremony to honour and release the spirits of those who have passed from the material realm, *The Scrubbing Project* turns upon the completion of the mythic circle that straddles the worlds of spirit and flesh. In Star World, three Winged Warrior Women "audition" in song for the opportunity to visit Earth and embody three "raggedy ass half-breeds." But this spiritual "Squaw Squad" is as badly in need of transformation as the human community it has come to repair: With the loss of Flying Eagle Woman, the quartet has been dis-membered. And for these spirits, much as for the women they will embody, "it's dead feast time:"

> Let's start.
> We can't.
> Why not?
> We're waiting for Lydia. (Turtle Gals)

Imported from a decaying landscape wherein flesh has been divorced from spirit, words divorced from meaning, and memory has become a curse, Beckett's signature refrain is utilized by Turtle Gals in a habitual, rapid-fire exchange that underscores the distinction between "waiting" as a deliberate act that facilitates a desired outcome and "waiting" as an anti-act engendered by and engendering only stasis and despair. Esperanza waits for a written apology for the atrocities perpetrated upon all her relations. Until it is proffered, neither she nor the murdered spirits she carries will be allowed to rest. Ophelia waits for signs that her scars are "blessed" — fraught with divine purpose and meaning. Branda X waits for her seven-year-old daughter to be returned into her custody. They wait for recognition, restoration, justice, transformation, so that they can begin to live. But hasn't history demonstrated that they/we cannot stake their/our survival, continuance, and healing on the attainment of the redress and compensation owed to them/us by a dominant "Other?" Like Beckett's Chaplinesque tramps, we might as well be "waiting for Godot."

As they await Lydia in the material realm, the women huddle in support-group- stasis to mechanically testify that they are "*living* with genocide." But when they slip through the "portals" to the in-between world of vaudeville and musical comedy, life truly asserts itself in all its dimensions with a corporeal vigor and spiritual ebullience that seem at once absolutely fitting and totally out-of-keeping in the shadowy world of America's forgotten myth-makers. Preserved on celluloid, plastic, or paper to be passively consumed, these performative "traditions" have worked against us by containing and distorting Indigenous experience. And the *Project*'s virtuoso song-and-dance *homage* to this in-between world challenges its authority by presenting what Monique Mojica and Ric Knowles have termed an "active perversion" of its distorted mythologies (vii). Hence, a wacky, slapstick routine during which the trio embodies the Marx Brothers and scrubs down the stage to the raucous accompaniment of Al Jolson's "Who Played Poker with Pocahontas while John Smith was Away" affords more than a moment of comic indictment. The "minstrel show" is "perverted" (or converted) into a restorative act as the performers *re-appropriate* this site of our misappropriation by inhabiting its stage and embodying its archetypes. An erstwhile site of stasis and degradation is purged of its celluloid shadows and dead voices. And it is prepared as a site of ceremony where living, Native performers embody the half-remembered shades of "red-face" buffoonery that pretended to embody our ancestors. Here, the "cartoon" that shamed Native peoples with its grotesque distortions is forced to give voice to its own shame as "Mr. Bones" and "Interlocutor" speculate over a collection of abandoned shoes — a silent, unimpeachable witness to wholesale slaughter and genocidal policy. Minstrelsy is translated here into memorial as, at long last, the voices of authentic, Indigenous experience take centre stage to speak.

[4]Traditionally, a ceremonial "score" (whether expressed in the elements of dance, song, chant, drum, instrumentation, or mimesis) contains instances of "incremental repetition" (belonging to any one or all of these elements). As these elemental refrains are echoed throughout the event, they may express themselves in repetitions of four (offered to the north, south, east, and west) or of six (offered to the north, south, east, west, up, and down) or of seven (offered to the north, south, east, west, up, down, and centre – "where we stand") (Gunn Allen 64).

At this point in the show, the ceremonial centre is still imperceptible — still to be recovered and dis-covered. So, this "rite," presented on Turtle Gals' stage, links Indigenous peoples globally from every direction; it links us to the ancestors, and it links us to our descendants through our acts. But it is an "unhappy" union, forged in blood. It is perverse, because these links (manifested in ceremony) are meant to affirm our gratitude for, commitment to, and active participation in the process of creation. Self-destruction perverts the process. Hence, it has no place in ceremony. It obliterates the spiritual centre.

On the public stages of the "New World," the Wampanoag leader, Metacom (King Phillip), was *mis-named* "Metamora." His life-of-service to his people and his unspeakable murder were played out in red-face as "a one-man minstrel show" (Kaufmann 115). Soon after, in the burlesques and vaudevilles of the 1840s and 1850s, he was presented to America as "The Last of the Pollywogs," and finally characterized as a clownish megalomaniac, "Metaroarer" (Wilmeth 135). On Turtle Gals' stage he will be remembered not as a degraded and static caricature but as a vital leader, whose actions continue to inform the lives of his descendants today. As in Ceremony, once "the threshold [between worlds] has been broken," the circle begins to complete itself. Just as the Winged Warrior Spirits embody the human women, so the human women begin to embody the Winged Warrior Spirits who are their ancestors. Metacom's widow re-rights her story through her descendant, Ophelia, recounting the slaughter of her husband and the sacrifices of the remaining Wampanoag who accepted Christianity to ensure the survival of their grandchildren. Through this grandchild, she reminds all of the "Stone People" that we are not unnatural and accidental detritus abandoned in the wake of the devastation caused by the collision of two worlds. Much has been ransomed for our coming. And while we are a "new" people, we are part of an ancient weave and bound by reciprocal obligations that extend far beyond the circumstances of our genesis.

A new people is worthy of its own central origin-myth. The right-construction of this prose record and its embodied expression afford a psychic centre from which to see ourselves as our ancestors see us: We have been taught to imagine ourselves as we have been reflected through an oppressor's lens; we have learnt to hate the "Grotesque Mutants" (Turtle Gals) we saw reflected there. But the ancestors speak through to testify that we are as beauteous and rare as "the children of human women who kanoodled the angels" (Turtle Gals). We were "beloved" even before we were born. Suddenly, the "erase deface" refrain has been transformed from an innocent **reaction** born of necessity to a perverse **action** born of dis-ease. And this transformation implicates us, transforming despairing acts from poignant reflections of our victimization into archival markers of our forgetfulness of the ancestral sacrifices that bought our lives. Our ancestors dreamed victory in our coming — not eternal victimization. And as their grandchildren, it is our *responsibility* to see ourselves through their eyes and to imagine our corporeal presence as the archival embodiment, upon which that victory writes itself. As the children of survivors, we "must survive" (Turtle Gals). This is the gift we hold. This is the responsibility we carry.

> Esperanza: But once you've seen,
> you can't ever pretend you don't see
> and I see.
> (As she gathers up bones)
> I will carry you, I will care for you, I will feed you,
> and I will sing you songs of comfort.
> I will wash away the dirt, and the
> ragged flecks of flesh and skin
> And you will be warm
> And you will be loved
> And I will build memory. (Turtle Gals)

Our responsibilities to our fellows do not end with death; nor do they begin with birth. As Laguna Pueblo scholar Paula Gunn Allen reminds us, interconnections, mutual dependencies, and individual responsibilities constitute the tribally specific "terms of existence," around which each nation's ceremonial cycle has been authored (73). Throughout this Project, Flying Eagle Woman's wings remain centrally suspended in Star World, at once marking her physical absence even as they recall her spiritual presence. As she is invoked and remembered as "one of us," she compels her winged compatriots to continue her healing project and challenges her mortal spectators to don our own "twenty-league-boots" and to follow in her "twenty-league-steps." Branda X must stop waiting; she must "go to the underworld and cross the raging river" (Turtle Gals) to fulfill her responsibilities and exercise agency as a mother. Ophelia must let go of the paralyzing, "protective" mask of the martyred child and assume the identity of a grown woman so that she too can exercise her responsibilities as an active participant in the *project* of ongoing creation. Likewise, Esperanza must lay down her bundle of bones, release murdered spirits, and begin to nurture the living with the same painstaking commitment that she has devoted to the nurturance of the dead. And we, "once [we've] seen," can no longer pretend to be innocent and uncomprehending. We must recognize, acknowledge, and act upon this embodiment of personal transformation from passive victim to active victor. From Star World, Flying Eagle Woman's wings remind us to remember our responsibilities and enjoin us to act upon them as they dissolve the thresholds between temporal worlds, spirit and flesh, and between active agency and passivity.

Re-Genesis Finale: "Let's Start"

To underscore the dissolution of these liminal spaces, the trio completes their/our Dead Feast memorial by unfurling three seemingly endless scrolls, which are reminiscent of both the birch-bark scrolls that document the creation stories, migration history, and ritual praxis of the *Anishinaabek* and the *Torah* Scrolls documenting the creation, migration, rites, and laws of Israel. These scrolls constitute our own *Yad Vaschem*; and as they are pulled out into the audience to be passed back by each spectator, they at once link the house to the stage, link descendant to ancestor, link one to another, and enforce collective, physical involvement in an act of remembrance that implicates us all and that charges us (colonized and colonial descendant, alike) with personal responsibility to participate in this vital *project* of redress and healing.

Hence, the show's musical finale, during which Harburg and Arlen's *Over the Rainbow* is re-arranged and performed as a rousing Pow wow number, constitutes much more than a dazzling display of cultural fusion. This emblem of Americana is not merely "borrowed" by the ensemble. After all, what child growing up on this continent has not seen or will not see (at least an excerpt of) *The Wizard of Oz*? It is part of a shared cultural vocabulary that transmits a similar message to all. Initially reprised by St. John in the tradition of Judy Garland, the ballad's underlying spirit of wistful passivity is revealed. The land beyond its "rainbow" is unreachable — the stuff of lullabies and dreams. The singer can only long for transcendence; she cannot achieve it: "Birds [may] fly over the rainbow;" but she and her auditors remain eternally earthbound.

Picked up by Mojica and Lauzon and transformed by all into a Pow wow number, its spirit is translated. There is no drum, no circle, no dance steps, no regalia. The performers group themselves in a loose line facing the audience and keeping time on a "KFC" barrel. Without any violation, they have isolated and communicate the essential, unifying spirit of the Round Dance (which manifests itself in the silences between what is sounded). Their bodies rhythmically rise and fall like birds effortlessly lifted on the jet-stream; voices dip and soar — carried by something outside the singers themselves. And as our hearts pick up the performers' rhythms, we too are borne aloft by the same spirit that carries them: Quite literally, we are dancing in our seats. No longer passively contemplating an insubstantial trick of light and water, the dreamer has become the *doer*; and the rainbow upon which the song carries her (and us) is as accessible in the commonplace as it is beauteous in its *minido* (mystery). It reveals

itself as a path upon which the performers plant their feet and begin to move towards something greater than themselves. Alternatively referred to as "the Red Road" or "the Rainbow Road" by various nations across Turtle Island (North America), *this* "rainbow" is revealed as the road of tradition — *minobimaatisiiwin*, the way of good life. And tradition is more than the sum of what we believe, or what we know, or what we think we know. It is the sum of ancestral teachings, contemporary knowledge, and the actions that reflect our intimate relationships with and within the biotas that sustain us and that we are obligated to sustain. It is a *project* that demands our utter engagement and active participation. And *The Scrubbing Project*, as a contemporary rite of re-membering and healing, does not merely *show* us the way: It moves our feet along the path and transforms us from passive receptors into active agents in the ongoing *project* of creation and re-creation. *How Indian are we? Indian enough to....*

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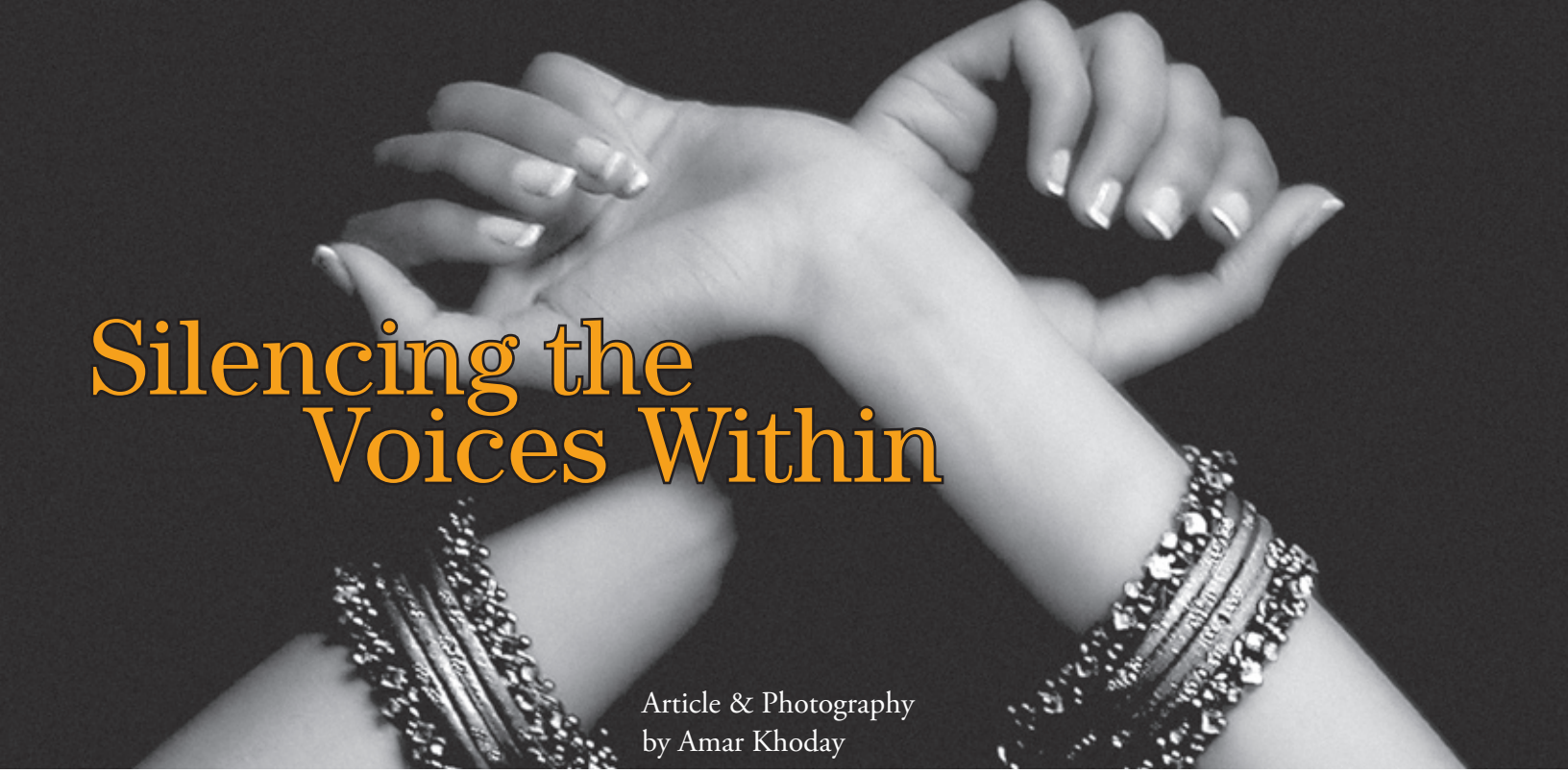

Silencing the Voices Within

Article & Photography
by Amar Khoday

Freedom of expression is the lifeblood of modern democracies. Subject to certain limitations, this right (at least in theory) allows individuals to criticize and question the status quo and any inequities that prevail in their society without fear of state retribution. Censorship — whether at the hands of the government, a majority, a cabal claiming to represent the majority, or self-imposed by individuals themselves — inhibits public debate on vital issues and erodes the possibility of socio-cultural development and progress.

From this perspective, the silencing of an artist is tantamount to a "cultural honour killing." The elimination of an artist's voice, even where this does not result in physical death, constitutes murder of another kind — the execution of thoughts and ideas. On the juridical plane, the primary victim of cultural honour killings is the right to freedom of expression itself.

In their normative sense, honour killings involve the literal slaying of a human life in response to a dishonour that the victim (usually a woman) has allegedly inflicted upon her family, locality, religious community, sect, or nation. As with their normative counterparts, perpetrators of cultural honour killings commit their crimes with the object of saving face and eliminating vexing and threatening voices that challenge the alleged views of the majority. Yet, freedom of expression is ever so precious to individuals who make up a dissenting minority; and, more than occasionally, these dissenting voices are embodied in the works of minority artists, musicians, and writers. Artistic expression transcends the artist's physical passing; its effects are experienced for generations to come. It is within this context that cultural honour killings must be seen as particularly odious.

Culture is in a constant state of flux. Matters of politics, economics, social issues, and religious concerns are all part of the tapestry of culture. Religion as part of this global cultural matrix is subject to change and progress, and artists can be instrumental in assisting in such vital and constant changes.

In recent months, the limits of the freedom of expression have been brought to the forefront with the re-publication of the cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad in European and North American newspapers. The cartoons' re-publication resulted in widespread protests around the world, some that remained peaceful and others that culminated in violence and arrests. The cartoon controversy has provoked numerous discussions on the use of art as a tool for cultural commentary, discussions that have been ongoing for decades, most notably in the aftermath of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. In the world of theatre, *Behzti* by British Sikh playwright Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti has been a front runner in opening up conversation about criticism of religious practice and the limits of speech.

In December 2004, Bhatti became a target for reactionaries and socio-religious conservatives seeking to monopolize how individuals should view and depict religion and culture. Just a little over one week after it opened, *Behzti* was shut down by a violent mob, an action that was followed by death threats. Bhatti was effectively silenced over her mounting of a trenchant critique of her community's perceived espousal of materialism and superficiality and its consequent shifting away from the core fundamentals of Sikhism. Bhatti embodied this shift most notably through a controversial scene in which a prominent and fictional Sikh community leader commits rape and murder within a *gurdwara* — a Sikh holy place.

Bhatti's views may have been misguided or completely off base, and clearly society would have benefited from hearing the reasons for these views. But instead of exploring the substance of her ideas, discussion was mired in the procedural morass of how she can and should express herself. Debates over the extent of the freedom of expression are by all means important and will continue. Nevertheless, at some stage in a society's cultural development it becomes imperative to discuss the content and validity of artists' assertions and advance beyond the debate about whether they can assert them in the first place. Unfortunately, the essential issue before us today is not whether Bhatti's assertions of the community's espousal of materialism and descent into hypocrisy are correct. Rather, it is about her right to raise and openly discuss matters of contention, even in a

Ulka Simone Mohanty

on the one hand and the venom of bigots on the other demonstrates the mental atrophy so inherent to reactionaries and fanatics. It is a "disability" that does not deserve accommodation but absolute rejection.

Religious minorities (among others) seek to express and follow their religious views unhindered by a majority that posits a different religious worldview. Curiously, that same desire to maintain freedom of religious expression is not extended to a minority of dissenting individuals within the same community. The reactionaries who interpose themselves as spokespersons representing the community (and it is questionable whether they truly reflect the views of the community) cannot seek to ask for the freedom to express themselves unhindered while simultaneously depriving others of the very same

"By allowing her thoughts to stretch beyond the narrow confines of language and ethnicity, Bhatti opened a portal for others to walk through and share a critical view of her community."

caustic manner, and remain unmolested by Talibanized community censors.

The *Behzti* affair and others like it epitomize a fundamental clash of power and interests regarding possibly the most sacred of cultural holy cows — religion. In its broadest sense, it is the clash between individual dissenters (often supported by numerous like-minded individuals and groups) seeking to reform how we traditionally practice and interpret religion versus a cabal of reactionaries seeking to maintain and pressure others to view the world through its limited lens. Often the cabal seeks to assert itself as the legitimate voice of the majority it claims to represent. Dissenting artists play a pivotal role in undermining the power of reactionaries by throwing a spotlight on social ills and excesses arising from the social and religious practices of the majority as advocated by the cabal.

Despite the adverse reaction *Behzti* received from reactionaries within the Sikh community, Bhatti's intent was not to defile or defame its sense of honour. As evidenced in her letter, featured in *alt. theatre 3.3*, Bhatti is a devout Sikh whose objective was to draw attention to how far common social practices among her fellow community members had strayed from the central tenets of the religion. In particular, Bhatti derided the shifting emphasis towards wealth, status, and superficiality. The rape scene epitomized the community's drastic deviation.

Bhatti's "sin" was to express an opinion that a section of the Anglo-Sikh community perceived diminished their sense of honour before mainstream British society. She did so by writing *Behzti* in English and consequently permitting a larger audience access to her play, extending beyond the borders of her Punjabi speaking community. Put another way, by allowing her thoughts to stretch beyond the narrow confines of language and ethnicity, Bhatti opened a portal for others to walk through and share a critical view of her community.

The *Behzti* affair occurred within a particular social and political context in England. Like other religious and ethnic minorities, Sikhs have been at the receiving end of ridicule and racial antagonism for years and are understandably sensitive to remarks about their culture and religion. When openly critical statements are made by someone from within the community, a feeling of betrayal pervades and overcomes the senses; it seems that outsiders are given front row seats in the airing of dirty laundry. But the failure to distinguish between honest and constructive social commentary by an insider right to question the community with respect to their adherence to that faith.

Finally, cultural honour killings are not limited to marginalized religious minorities, but are also executed by cabals within majority religious communities. In India, elements among the Hindu Right have targeted the films of Deepa Mehta, which they have deemed offend their and by extension all Hindu sensibilities. In the case of *Fire*, the movie halls in Mumbai which exhibited the film were damaged, and *Water* was shut down during production in India. *Water* was eventually filmed elsewhere and released last year. Similarly, Muslim reactionaries within the Muslim majority in Bangladesh directed their venom toward Dr. Tasleema Nasreen's book *Lajja,* which questioned patriarchal dominance, the advancement of women's rights, and the majority's oppression of the Hindu minority.

Notably, both Mehta and Nasreen were part of the religious majorities that targeted them for cultural honour killings. While Bhatti's play featured the blemishes of her community for British audiences, Mehta's films and Nasreen's book were presented outside the boundaries of their national origins. The communal loss of face assumed international proportions.

At the heart of these cases is the failure of reactionaries to articulate a reasoned response to perceived acts of dishonour without resorting to barbarism, violence, and death threats. It is ironic that in their drive to restore honour, those who perpetrate these cultural honour killings fail to grasp that they bring greater shame and embarrassment to the very community they claim to represent and in whose honour these acts are perpetrated. By employing violence, reactionaries perpetuate the stereotype of the "unreconstructed" third world immigrant (or society) who is incapable of participating in "civilized discourse" through peaceful and articulate means. The result is the erosion of the freedom of expression and the perpetuation of stereotypes, the very ones to which the reactionaries are reacting.

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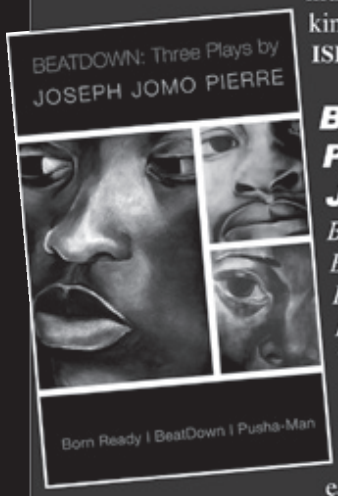

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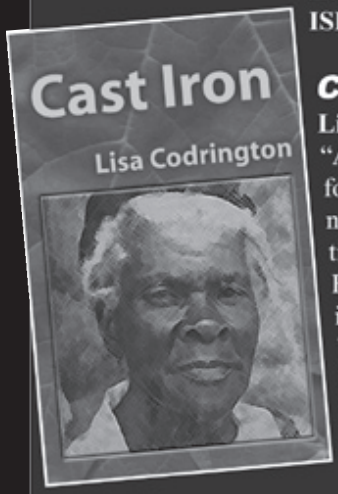

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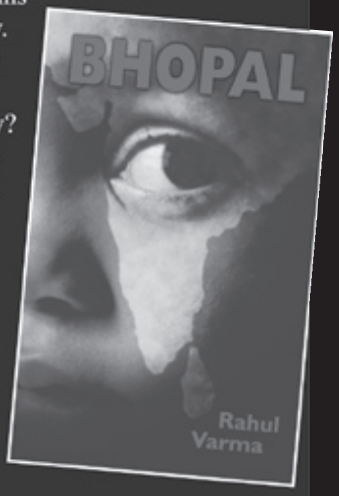

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