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# theatre

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

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# Theatre and Human Rights

by Edward Little



In December 2006, an unlikely alliance of Montreal-based actors, activists, lawyers, educators, and students of theatre and law traveled to Bangalore to study Indian Street Theatre with the Centre for Social Action (CSA) at Christ College. There we were joined by an equal number of Indian students and teachers from a range of backgrounds: theatre in education, journalism, communications, and religious studies. This core group of about thirty constituted Phase I of *Rights Here!*—A Theatre and Law for Human Rights project in collaboration with Christ College, Montreal's Teesri Duniya Theatre, Concordia University's Specialization in Theatre and Development, the Park Extension Youth Organization (PEYO), and a legal advisory committee consisting of members of the equality committee of the Quebec Bar Association.

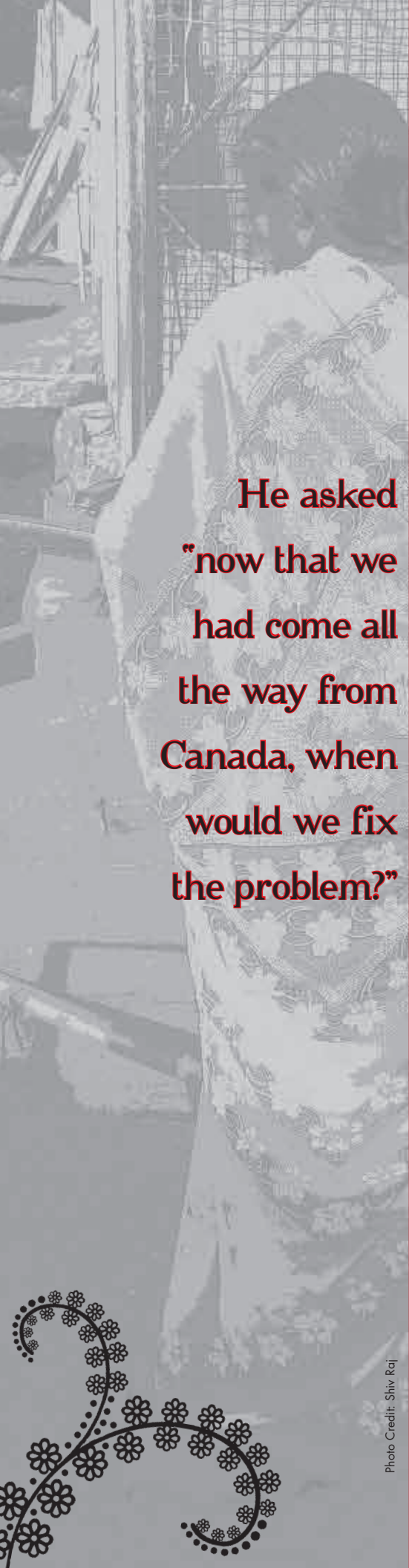
Phase I became known as the “Kannada/Canada Street Theatre Project” (Kannada being the ancestral language of the State of Karnataka)<sup>1</sup>. For three intensive weeks, we studied the physical, philosophical, and socio-cultural aspects of Street Theatre. We visited slums and rural villages where the CSA conducts programs in family nutrition, schools, micro-financing, and sustainable development. And we consulted with members of Free Tree Open University—an association dedicated to connecting scholars, activists, visionaries, artists, and poets across countries and cultures<sup>2</sup>.

We traveled to Havarakere, a remote village of two hundred inhabitants, where we sat with villagers on tarps spread under a starlit sky to watch a play about bonded labour and ensuring that children attend school. The play, performed by the Street Theatre troupe Jeevika, was particularly poignant for this village at this time because a significant impediment to education was the absence of bus service in or out of the village. Children, adults, the elderly or the infirm had to walk or be carried twelve kilometers on a rutted track simply to reach the nearest secondary road. There they would wait for a bus to carry them to the nearest services. Only weeks before, Jeevika and the villagers had finally caught the government's attention by blockading the secondary road. The state agreed to provide bus service, but then claimed they could not because parts of the road were impassible. Fifty villagers took up hand implements and straightened the road.

The arrival of our bus, carrying thirty outsiders (half of them from Canada) marked the second ever such vehicle to make the journey. Our visit was bound to disrupt the isolated local ecology, and in spite of assurances that we were there to observe and learn, many residents remained suspicious of our motives. Nevertheless, we were graciously fed a meal of rice and dahl served on banana leaves. Close to the time we were to leave, the village bus arrived on its inaugural run. The driver backed into our recently vacated “theatre,” the bus was garlanded, lamps were lit and *pujas* performed. I became the unofficial photographer for the event. Tensions dissipated as residents came to understand that we joined them in celebrating their historic achievement. I left the village humbled by the generosity, tenacity, intense pride, and fragile dignity of its people.

Inspired by the work of Jeevika and the CSA, our project created pieces about access to water and the treatment and role of women. Some of the regular CSA volunteers added a piece on AIDS. We came to appreciate the degree to which issues pertaining to water already constitute a crisis in many parts of Karnataka<sup>3</sup> and we learned what the CSA had before us—that women were an undervalued and underutilized resource of many communities. Where men often failed to hold together self-help groups, women were better able to collect, manage and prioritize the dispersal of available funds for housing, small business initiatives, or medical needs. We performed in English and Kannada on college campuses, at urban malls, in a Bangalore slum, and in two rural villages in the Hoskote Region. Canadians incorporated words and songs in Kannada into their performances and simultaneous translation was provided during the discussions following each performance. We experienced a land of extreme contrasts, where beauty and horror exist side by side—separated only by a wall or a gate; where wealth and privilege circulate amidst crushing poverty and unimaginable suffering. We visited places where suspicion, despair, and hopelessness were etched on the faces of children and adults. But more often it was the sense of dignity, openness, joy, and generosity that we encountered that deeply moved us. As we processed through the streets of urban slums and rural villages—singing a traditional call and response song and beating the drum that announced our performance—we were followed, Pied-Piper-like, first by growing throngs of ebullient children and then by others to the square in front of the temple or house where our performance would take place.

Erratum: the poem “Might is Right” published in *alt.theatre* 4.4 was written by Ehab Lotayef, but mistakenly attributed to another of our regular contributors of poetry. *alt.theatre* deeply regrets the error and offers our apologies to Mr. Lotayef.



**He asked  
“now that we  
had come all  
the way from  
Canada, when  
would we fix  
the problem?”**

Travel meant wild bus rides through the incredibly congested streets of Bangalore and narrow rural roads. Bus trips were opportunities for practicing drum, song, and music; for listening to blaringly loud Bollywood music; and for dancing in the aisles—this passed the time, diverted attention from the perils of traffic, and raised energy to performance pitch. Our bus could not navigate the road between the Hoskote villages, so we traveled standing and wedged into an open-backed transport. The tarpaulin-covered metal framework provided handholds, shelter from the sun, and just enough headroom for anyone under five foot ten. Our bodies were so tightly packed on the four-by-eight cargo deck that that anyone who momentarily lost their grip was safely and effectively immobilized between their fellow freight.

At the second village, we encountered a situation echoing Augusto Boal’s early accounts of his Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal, following a play that urged farmers to take up arms and resist their oppressors, was approached by a man who said, “I’m ready! Go get your gun, then we will go to get mine.” Boal was humbled to explain that he fought with theatre and words, not weapons. Following our earnest performance about water, a villager thanked us, politely confirmed that shortages are indeed dire, and spoke of his fears that soon there would not be enough water for his children. He asked “now that we had come all the way from Canada, when would we fix the problem?” It was a moment of truth that cut to the heart of what we were doing, and it underlined a key principle of theatre and social change—the essential need for partnerships and alliances.

An answer to the villager’s question—which our troupe could not supply—came from the locally based workers of the CSA: the villagers must not wait for government, state, or well-meaning Indian or foreign nationals to address the problem. They must take action to help themselves. They must decide, for example, to reduce the amount of eucalyptus growth—a relatively easy cash crop, but a thirsty plant contributing to lowering the water table. The CSA could assist in a number of ways. They could provide research and expertise to assist residents make informed decisions under difficult conditions, help them to set up micro-credit projects to diversify the local economy, and provide research and meeting spaces where information could be accessed and disseminated.

The lessons taught by our experience can be read in many accounts of theatre for social change. Interdisciplinary partnerships and alliances (both within and beyond the

arts) are essential to mobilize various kinds and levels of resources. Creative and innovative solutions have to be nurtured locally. Theatre arts, to the degree that they honestly seek dialogue with their audiences and amongst their creative partners, can in a nonthreatening and effective way draw attention to assumptions and culturally inherited mindsets that may be working against desired change. Participation in theatre can stimulate new perspectives and new ways of thinking, and it can help chart creative courses of action—what Boal characterizes as “rehearsals for change.”

Our limited time with Indian artists, activists, and individuals from a wide range of academic and social backgrounds taught us a few more specific lessons. It led us to question more deeply the degree to which instruments such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Canadian and Quebec Charters might be interpreted to enshrine Western values through privileging individual property and resource rights over communal rights. It led us to examine the self-indulgent and counterproductive aspects of “Western guilt” carried by many of our participants. And it underscored the urgent need to more deeply consider local and cultural relativism—as opposed to a set of rules and norms—as a precondition for promoting human rights as a living culture. Finally, it reinforced the need to challenge reductive and divisive notions of “Eastern versus Western” art, and “theatre versus direct social action.”

Sandeep Bhagwati addressed some of the cultural implications of these divisions in a recent talk given at Concordia University.<sup>4</sup> Bhagwati characterized “two dominant sets of expectations [that] seem to define art making” today—the “genius paradigm” and the “yardstick of tradition.” Bhagwati notes that although some Eastern traditions see “striving for ‘originality’ ...as a rather shallow show of self-importance,” from a Western perspective “traffic between the cultures of the world is still seen as an almost exclusively bilateral exchange between the Empire of Artistic Individualism and the ‘collective’ ethnic traditions of the world.” Bhagwati rightly calls for a more sophisticated analysis, one that can engage with the kinds of emergent “composite identities” that inform art making in our increasingly hybridized world.

Street Theatre and community-engaged forms have been wrestling with the socio-political implications of composite identities for some time now. Bim Mason’s categorization of street performers, for example, suggests a range of social intervention extending from the “entertainer” who plays to the



status quo to the iconoclastic “provocateur.” For Mason, these extremes are not mutually exclusive. They exist on a continuum of aesthetic roles replete with “animators” (those who encourage active participation) and “communicators” (those who seek dialogic exchange) (*Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance*). In theory, if not always in practice, participatory community-engaged projects such as *Rights Here!* chart a similar continuum extending from *affirmation* (the strategic reinforcement or reiteration of commonly held community traditions, beliefs, or values) to *intervention* (a cathartic rite of passage wherein identity, representation, and ways of thinking and living as sanctioned by state, religion, culture and community may be questioned or subjected to change). In such work, negotiating the complexities of composite identities is an essential part of both creative process and artistic representation.

Bhagwati calls for new intellectual tools capable of dealing with “composite identities, composite cultures, and composite feelings of belonging.” Community-engaged art clearly has much to offer in this regard, yet its theories and experience can never

circulate among those who would position art and social action as mutually exclusive. Perhaps first among the intellectual tools should be the consideration of what intercultural worker Joseph Schaeffer characterizes as “differences that matter, and those that don’t” (*The Stone People*). This notion resonates in Jared Diamond’s analysis of social history, in which he characterizes the spread of ideas as occurring across a spectrum ranging from “blueprint copying” (precise reiteration or duplication) to “idea diffusion” (imitation inspired by the general idea or purpose of an original) (*Guns, Germs, and Steel*). The promise of composite identities is innovation, a broadened vision of how art is produced and defined, and greater insight into “the intentions and values” that inform our aesthetic choices and our artistic subjects (Prentki and Selman, *Popular Theatre in Political Culture*). Their realization is an ongoing concern of *alt.theatre*.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>In Phase II of *Rights Here!* theatre arts are being used to work directly with young people from a diversity of cultural backgrounds in the Montreal neighbourhood of Park Extension. Phase III will see the establishment of the *Rights Here!* Centre for

Advocacy—staffed by volunteer law students and overseen by members of the *Rights Here!* Legal Advisory. Theatre will continue to play an important educational and consciousness-raising role within the Centre.

<sup>2</sup>For more information about Free Tree visit: [http://ciedsindia.org/free\\_tree.htm](http://ciedsindia.org/free_tree.htm)

<sup>3</sup>Climate change has already dramatically reduced rainfall, the water table is dropping so surface wells must go much deeper and the quality of obtainable water is declining. Meanwhile, Pepsi Cola and others are buying up water reserves. Estimates suggest that within ten years, some 80% of India’s population will not be able to afford drinking water. During our stay in Bangalore, Christ College was host to a national conference debating a controversial government plan to link India’s river systems.

<sup>4</sup>From an unpublished manuscript delivered as part of Concordia’s Defiant Imagination Series, January 2007 (9-11). Bhagwati was raised in both India and Germany and has been recently appointed as a Canada Research Chair in Inter-X Art in the departments of Theatre and Music at Concordia University.

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# “Adding It Up:” (En)Gendering (and Racializing) Canadian Theatre

by Rebecca Burton

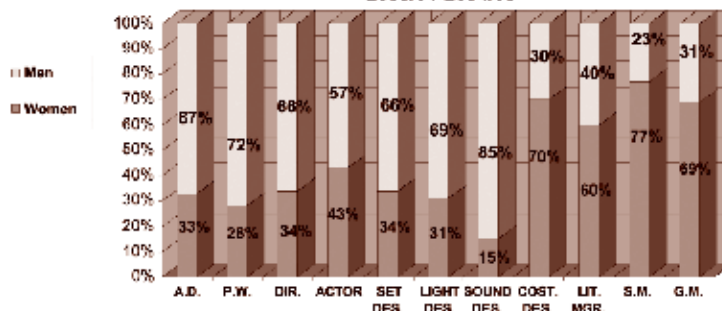
In 1982, Rina Fraticelli released her landmark report, *The Status of Women in the Canadian Theatre*, revealing that women accounted for 10% of the produced playwrights, 13% of the directors and 11% of the artistic directors (5). Contrary to popular belief, the theatre industry had not achieved gender parity; women suffered severe marginalization, near invisibility, and systemic discrimination. I first encountered this germinal report as an undergraduate student in the early 1990s while researching the history of women in Canadian theatre. I was astounded by the bleak figures, and as I went on in my studies to specialize in women’s theatre, I wondered why subsequent research had not been conducted, later discovering that neither of my responses was unique. With the dawning of the new millennium, calls to “re-open” Fraticelli’s report were increasingly heard in light of the continued discrepancy between the perception of equality and the first-hand, often marginalized experiences of many women in the field. How far had women come? Was there genuine equality in the theatre sector, and, if not, what could be done to remedy the situation? The posing of these questions, and the level of intergenerational interest generated by the topic, led to the establishment of Equity in Canadian Theatre: The Women’s Initiative.

The Women’s Initiative is composed of a varied group of theatre practitioners and academics operating with a two-fold mandate: to assess the current status of women in Canadian theatre and to develop appropriate action plans to help rectify remaining inequities. Given my academic pursuits, I was hired as the main researcher for the Initiative’s pilot project, a twenty-first-century “follow-up” to Fraticelli’s benchmark study. One of the research components involved a national survey sent to theatre companies of all shapes, sizes, and regions in the summer of 2005, the results of which figure prominently in the Initiative’s recently-released report, *Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre*. The following is a brief overview of the Initiative’s findings.

For the most part, it is the triumvirate of artistic director, director and playwright that determines the nature of theatrical culture on Canada’s stages. As Chart 1 illustrates, women have not yet surpassed the 35% participation mark in these key positions; (white) men continue to predominate in the “triumvirate of power.” Artistic directors (ADs) exercise the greatest amount of authority, as 90% of the surveyed companies indicated that their ADs are *solely* responsible for playwright/production decisions, and 76% reported that their ADs *independently* choose director hires. We found that the preponderance of male ADs perpetuates male domination in the areas of directing and playwriting, as well as in acting, set, lighting, and sound design. Men run 67% of the companies, and they hire male playwrights and directors 76% of the time respectively, male designers for 70-88% of

the productions (costuming excepted), and male actors two times as often as female. As these statistics suggest, theatres with male ADs (MADs) have lower rates of representation for women than companies with female ADs (FADs); for example, female directors are hired for 55% of the FADs’ productions, compared to only 24% of the MADs’ productions (resulting in an overall figure of 34%). The greater a company’s profile and government subsidy, the more the under-represented women are, as only 20% of the ADs at the most resourced and prestigious of Canada’s theatres are female (down from 33% overall).

Chart 1: Gender Breakdown of Theatre Industry Positions, 2000/01-2004/05



Whereas men generally occupy top positions of power, women tend to predominate in secondary and behind-the-scenes roles, functioning as satellites of support to the main creators as stage managers and dramaturgs/literary managers, or in positions associated with domesticity and organizational support, such as costume design and general management (see Chart 1). Women also abound in administrative and customer service positions, forming the majority of office and contract workers, part-time staff, and box-office employees. The industry’s employment patterns reveal a stereotypical segregation of labour organized according to antiquated conceptions of conventional gender roles. This situation perpetuates gender in-

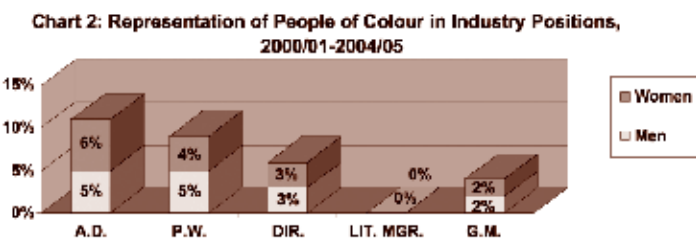
**“How far had women come? Was there genuine equality in the theatre sector, and, if not, what could be done to remedy the situation?”**

equity, it invalidates and obstructs the development of female artists, it potentially stunts innovation and progression in the industry and the art form, and it deprives audience members (59% of whom are estimated as female) of inclusive and representative experiences of cultural import.

For people of colour—defined as Aboriginal, Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West

Asian, Japanese, Korean, and Pacific Islander—the statistics are not as comprehensive as those for gender, as information regarding the racializing of certain positions was not requested (due to the survey's format). Still, as Chart 2 demonstrates, people of colour are poorly represented across the board, and they are occasionally excluded outright, as in the field of dramaturgy/literary management. FADs hire greater numbers of people of colour than MADs, particularly in production positions, but the findings are dismal in both instances, indicating systemic discrimination. The numbers for people of colour are reminiscent of those uncovered for women by Fraticelli in the early 1980s, which suggests that it might be as long as another quarter-century before marginal improvements are realized. Without access to key positions of authority, people of colour will remain largely absent from the nation's stages, and Canada's theatrical culture will continue to reflect a white dominant order that fails to embody the country's multicultural identity.

A gender-based analysis of the theatres reveals additional differences aside from employment characteristics. FADs have a higher incidence of theatre for young audiences (TYA), production tours, and use of non-traditional venues, and they produce more Canadian content, play premieres, co-productions, and collective creations than MADs. FADs are also disadvantaged in particular areas: they have a



lower incidence of incorporation, not-for-profit status, and charitable status; they utilize union hires, industry contracts, and wheelchair accessible venues less often; and they rent and change both rehearsal spaces and performance venues with greater frequency than MADs. These deficiencies compound instability, and they potentially affect a company's profile in the larger community, the quality of the theatrical experience, and by extension audience and critical reception, all of which can influence the overall funding and success rates of the FADs, disadvantaging them further still.

The disparities experienced by the FADs are primarily related to financial inequities. FADs generated only 61% of the total revenues that MADs did in 2004/05 (55% of the earned revenues, 63% of the fundraising monies, and 81% of the government grants). FADs receive a greater percentage of project grants (76% overall) than MADs (65%), but fewer FADs obtain prestigious and sustaining operating grants (67% overall) than MADs (80%). As both theatre heads and individuals, female practitioners receive a proportionately smaller percentage of government funding than their male counterparts. These economic discrepancies have serious consequences, affecting a myriad of areas, such as the activities described above, as well as the FADs' ability to pay their employees well (with few exceptions, MADs reimburse their workers with higher rates of compensation). Monetary insufficiencies manifest in increased adversity, scarcity of resources, limited personnel choices, practitioner burn-out, and company marginalization as the FADs struggle to do more with less (i.e. producing more Canadian content with less government funding). Company groupings aside, female playwrights and directors generally receive less remuneration than their male colleagues, primarily because women tend to be engaged by smaller, under-funded

companies, and this imbalance hinders the creative advancement and economic survival of female artists, additionally contributing to the nation's feminization of poverty.



Lack of access to key positions of power, limited opportunities and resources, occupational ghettoization, significant under-representation, and economic inequity are a few of the disadvantages currently faced by women (and often by people of colour) in the Canadian theatre industry. For a more detailed account, readers should consult the full report posted on-line at [www.pact.ca](http://www.pact.ca) (see the Works Cited for details). I will now move to a discussion of the difficulties that the Initiative encountered, and some of the responses that the study elicited, as the various community reactions further demonstrate the character of the theatre sector, the (secondary) status of women and people of colour, and the need for an industry-wide revolution in consciousness.

It was strongly felt that the Initiative should be as inclusive as possible, but this objective posed certain (and unexpected) problems. Questions about the sexual orientations of the industry's workers were originally included in the survey, although a test-run quickly revealed that companies were unwilling to identify their employees in this manner (due to an invasion of privacy), so this line of inquiry was necessarily abandoned. The decision to investigate racialization in tandem with gender also turned out to be a more contentious endeavour than we originally anticipated, as such questions garnered fewer responses than most others. Some people did not feel comfortable assigning a racialized label to their colleagues, others believed that such requests were unconstitutional, some were offended by what they perceived as a hidden agenda for affirmative action, and others argued that so-called diversity issues threatened to eclipse the project's focus on gender. Nonetheless, recognizing that gender and racialized discrimination are interconnected phenomena with inter-

**“As both theatre heads and individuals, female practitioners receive a proportionately smaller percentage of government funding than their male counterparts.”**

secting histories, and that any study on the status of women must be inclusive of *all* women, particularly in the context of Canada's multicultural society, the Initiative persevered with this aspect of the study despite controversy and resistance.

It seems that the unwillingness of the companies to identify and account for their hiring practices indicates a reticence on their part to acknowledge systemic discrimination, much less work towards its end. Rather than answer the questions posed, some responded by condemning the Initiative's perceived “political correctness” as a threat to artistic primacy, as if the former is an evil that automatically negates the latter. Others suggested that the composition of their audiences does not warrant the hiring of greater numbers of people of colour, demonstrating little understanding that if theatres change their programming practices to reflect Canada's multicultural identity then similar alterations and increases in audience membership might also occur, which would benefit both society and the theatre industry as a whole by encouraging greater diversity and breadth of

representation.

Given the companies' voluntary participation in the study and the extensive time commitment required to complete the survey, difficulties were also experienced in relation to the survey's return rate. Particularly telling is the fact that a proportionately larger number of companies with female ADs completed and returned the questionnaire than companies with male ADs, which, to my mind, provides additional evidence of the secondary position women occupy in the industry. The general lack of interest in and support for the study on the part of the MADs signals a failure to commit to the rectification of current gender (and racialized) imbalances. We encountered a similar indifference (and sometimes complete silence) obtaining statistical information from some of the arts councils: out of thirteen provincial and territorial bodies, only seven provided information, and three of those submitted incomplete data; with the handful of municipal councils that were approached, only one (the Toronto Arts Council) supplied statistics. The project is apparently viewed as a passé "women's issue" with no relevance to the larger community, even though women make up the majority of the industry's workers, arts councils' constituents, and theatres' audiences. If government granting agencies and theatre companies refuse to make a concerted effort to become actively involved in effecting positive change in the industry, I can't help but wonder how the situation will ever improve.

be deemed acceptable, standing-in for and replacing the 50% marker that would actually denote equality?

Another common reaction is a rejection and refutation of the statistics, usually taking one of two defensive forms. The first is an attempt to poke holes in the study's methodology to disprove the soundness of the analysis. The failure of more than half the country's theatres to complete the survey is often and conveniently invoked as evidence that the Initiative's results are distorted and invalid. In fact, the greater response-rate of the FADs means that an absolute "best case" scenario for the representation of women is provided; if more MADs completed the survey, the figures for women would have dropped further. This line of attack seemed to preoccupy the report's reception at PACT's 2006 AGM, and yet, as one attendee pointed out, when a TYA study was presented in a subsequent session, not one single question was raised about methodology. The second response is an effort to deflect, or re-direct, responsibility and culpability for the sector's gender and racialized imbalances. For instance, with people of colour, the demographics found in the larger population are often questioned in an effort to excuse the low industry numbers. According to Statistics Canada, "visible minority" women (not including First Nations women) form 22% of the population in British Columbia and 19% of the population in Ontario; a rate of representation that is not mirrored in the provinces' theatres at any level (27).

society needs *everyone* working towards this end. There are no easy answers, but the Initiative's report contains a number of recommendations for educational institutions, theatre companies, arts councils, and groups of concerned citizens to help offset the imbalances. These include equal opportunity committees, training and mentorship programs, active solicitation of applications from qualified women (and men of colour) for key industry positions, government incentives for employment equity, and community networks/alliances focused on gender and racialized issues. Canadian theatre will only play its role as a major cultural platform and will only achieve its highest potential for excellence once it offers the fullest range of creative opportunities to all of Canada's citizens. Clearly we have a way to go yet.

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Rebecca Burton is the main researcher for the Women's Initiative's pilot project and the author of *Adding it Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre*. She has a BA and MA in theatre, and is currently completing her doctorate degree at the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama with a dissertation on the emergence of contemporary Canadian feminist theatre in English, 1967-1977. Rebecca is also an educator, an occasional practitioner, and the board secretary for Sarasvati Productions.



Common responses to the report's findings further highlight a general apathy, and sometimes outright condemnation, for the project at hand. Many find the statistics to be just as they expected (with no shock or surprise about the under-representation of women or people of colour), and some are relieved to find that the figures are not as low as they feared, but both responses somehow render the results both tolerable and acceptable. Others interpret the numbers as substantial improvement made over time, despite evidence of gender and racialized discrimination, and this kind of positive (mis)interpretation manifests as complacency with the status quo. Somewhere along the line, the myth of equality triumphed and the bar for gender parity dropped; how else can a 30-35% participation rate for women

The reception of the report, the obstacles encountered throughout, and the results of the study indicate that the Canadian theatre industry is resistant to engaging actively in discourses and/or actions focused on improving gender and racialized inequities. The sector can generally be characterized as apathetic, demonstrating complacency with the status quo, and at worst, as openly hostile, justifying the current state of affairs, denying responsibility, and disputing the very existence of discrimination. Such reactions only underline the necessity of the Initiative's project and the urgent need for redress, pointing further to the revolution in consciousness that needs to occur in order to engender actual equality. All people have a responsibility to recognize discrimination and to do all they can to end it, and





# Collectif Moncton-Sable: New Visions of Acadian Theatre

by Glen Nichols

photos by Mathieu Léger

[B]eyond its contradictions, the discourse of “post-nationalism” enables us to analyze not a fragmentation of nationality, not the break-up of some older organic totality called “nation-state” or national culture, but the emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways, unrelated strings of events, modes of classification and compartments of reality.

- Balkýr

Scene from *Sans jamais parler du vent*. L-R: Lynne Surette, Phillip André Collette & Amélie Gosselin. Photo: Mathieu Léger.

In contrast to the early-modern Acadian theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, which performed a nationalism based on the reinforcement of mytho-historical differences, the renewed Acadian theatre in recent years has at its heart the impulse to dissolve discursive boundaries—or at least find ways to move across them more effectively. For example, the two oldest professional Acadian companies in New Brunswick, Théâtre l’Escaouette and Théâtre populaire d’Acadie, have developed a network of international and trans-Canadian production partners. Translations of English-Canadian, American, and British plays appear regularly on professional Acadian stages. Non-French-language theatre companies and other arts groups are encouraged to utilize the new theatre facilities of Théâtre l’Escaouette; for example, this company’s 2005 biennial new play development series (*Festival à haute voix*) highlighted an English-language play by a Mi’kmaq playwright.<sup>1</sup>

For Acadie’s youngest professional theatre company, Collectif Moncton-Sable, the boundary-crossing goes beyond the formal aspects of language, networking, and repertoire; for the members of Moncton-Sable, the “emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways” goes to the heart of their work. In playing between boundaries—of actor and character, performer and audience, text and performance, material and

story, performer and director, musician and artist, drama and poetry—the company performs the new dynamics of postmodern, post-nationalist Acadie.

The explicit link between culture (and theatre in particular) and the objectives of a defined Acadie were outlined by critic and teacher Zénon Chiasson in 1988: “Cut off from its roots, deprived of real political power, and kept in a minority state, it is normal that the Acadian people should seek to create a specific but compensatory cultural space and thus give itself a form of national existence”<sup>2</sup> (“Itinéraire” 78). The role of Antonine Maillet’s play *La Sagouine* (1971) in the initiation of this Acadian national existence has of course been well rehearsed (Chiasson, “Fragments” 63, 65; Bourque 93). In a similar fashion, other early modern Acadian plays such as *Louis Mailloux* and *Cochu et le soleil* by Jules Boudreau (Théâtre populaire de l’Acadie 1977 and 1978) “did not hesitate to thwart historical truth in order to realise the battle for social justice and liberty” (Chiasson, “Fragments” 66). Boudreau himself wrote in the cover material for the recording of *Louis Mailloux* that “it serves for us as a symbol of the Acadians’ struggle for their rights” (quoted in Chiasson, “Fragments” 66). *Cochu et le soleil* is a quintessential example of how the theatre performed the mytho-historicizing of modern “national” struggles in Acadie,

which Zénon Chiasson has called a “hyper-nationalist period” (“Fragments” 63). The play unifies the past and present: a reading of the historical expulsion of the Acadians from eighteenth-century New Brunswick is thinly veiled by a depiction of contemporary struggles over state expropriation of lands to create the Kouchibouguac National Park northeast of Moncton in the mid-1970s. Boudreau dedicated his play “to the deportees of Kouchibouguac that they may be the last.”

It is perhaps because modern Acadie does not have geo-political boundaries that it became especially concerned with metaphorical and cultural boundaries. The claim for national consciousness was defined by a unifying and mythologized reading of corporate and personal pasts. Jean-Paul Hauteceur explained this interest in the historical constructions of neo-nationalism: “It’s as if, in some way, Acadie was incapable of grasping itself as a pure immanence, as if the reference to history had to be upheld as compensation for the vagueness of its identity referents” (qtd. in Thériault 8).

As the Parti Acadien (founded in 1972) and its mandate of creating an independent nation-state of Acadie faded from the political landscape in the early 1980s,<sup>3</sup> the folkloric and historic construction of Acadian identity became more and more controversial. Herménégilde Chiasson—playwright,

film-maker, poet, visual artist, and now Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick—complained in 1994, “The discourse of folklore and ‘deportation’ is all well and good, but at a certain point there has to be something other than genealogy to affirm one as a people” (221). Genealogy and folklore stress the linearity and exclusivity of the national narrative and leave little room to interrogate the received interpretations of the past.<sup>4</sup> The work of Moncton-Sable disrupts the sense of narrative expectations on all levels in order to open discursive space—to move to a post-nationalist performance of Acadian identity.

The development of a solid and complex institutional infrastructure is hailed as an important indicator of the success of Acadian nation building (Thériault 17ff; Dubé, *passim*). And although the institutionalization of cultural production in Acadie has a more fluid history and impact (Finney, Loneragan, and Boucher 412ff), Moncton-Sable has chosen a contrary approach. Although considered a small company in terms of grant collecting, in 2005, according to Louise Lemieux (a founding member and “director” of the company), they effectively provided more roles for local actors than the other two major companies in Acadie combined (Mousseau). Lemieux’s irony is obvious when she says of the funding situation for the long-standing institutional theatres in Acadie that “[m]ore money is going to infrastructure and managing companies than to creation. The actors are terribly well managed” (qtd. in Mousseau). So this gem of a company (and “gem” is not my word but the word used by the actors, who have all worked for larger institutional companies, to describe their feelings about Moncton-Sable) has, by ignoring institutional boundaries of what can and cannot be done, had an important impact not only on individual members but on theatre in Acadie at large.

From their earliest work together, the members of the company have dedicated themselves to doing theatre differently, which includes the adamantly non-hierarchical structure of their company (Collette and Gosselin). There is no board or management layer, Louise Lemieux resists the term “director,” and every member is given complete freedom to contribute to the artistic process and product. The focus on being a truly collaborative ensemble blurs the boundaries of the traditional roles of actor, writer, musician, scenographer, etc. It seems too ideal to be real, but a particular combination of personalities makes it work (Collette and Gosselin). The openness extends beyond the core founding members. Every production introduces young actors and other artists, integrating them into the collaborative process and giving them the freedom to create in a respectful and non-judgemental environment. Long-standing members laugh when they describe the confusion of actors, trained to expect to be told what to do, who find themselves equal partners in the full creative process at Moncton-Sable.

Their most recent production, their tenth, furthered this approach even more. *Papier*, performed in Moncton in September 2006, brought together four authors—two from Quebec (Isabelle Cauchy and Michel Garneau) and two Acadians (Paul Bossé and Gracia Couturier)—with other text contributions by France Daigle and Sonya Malaborza. The collaborative and improvisational development of these texts was carried out by an expanded company of more than a dozen actors—even members of the English community were invited to participate. The company performed the openness of “new” Acadie; gone is the Acadie that was closed off from the rest of the province to protect its fragile minority. “New” Acadie is confident, operating in a trans-border world where Acadian, Québécois, French, English, old, young, traditional, and contemporary share a creative cultural space.

Although every Moncton-Sable production is unique in approach

and form, several strong characteristics run through the company’s work. Recursive exploration dominates narrative linearity in the structures of the plays. Even in more narrative pieces (like *Empreintes* or *Linoléum*), the use of fragments and varying repetitions defy linear boundaries. Linked to this, another common feature is the frequent use of metatheatrical or self-referential elements. The plays explore not only the implications of their subject material, but the processes of theatrical creation and representation themselves. And the audience is invited to share in this exploration by making the connections between different productions and other internal references. While the productions clearly are well received and highly regarded, they are sometimes criticized for being incomplete, seeming more works “in progress” than fully polished (Loneragan). I would completely agree: but this is in fact part of the richness of Moncton-Sable. They are not producing to a formula, so the product is never predictable, and the audience as well is engaged in the process and search. As *théâtre de recherche*, the company’s emphasis is on the communal act of creation; the ensemble approach, extending through performances and including the audience, emphasizes the idea that Acadie is a place imagined in irreducible flux at the crossroads of its many participants.

Their earliest works—*Moncton-Sable* (*Sand* and the origin of the

**“The plays explore not only the implications of their subject material, but the processes of theatrical creation and representation themselves.”**

company’s name) in 1997, *Craie* (*Chalk*) in 1999, and *Foin* (*Hay*) in 2000—were created over long periods of time (two years in the case of *Craie*). During this time, the company worked in close collaboration with the writer France Daigle and musicians (Jean-Marie Morin and Jean Surette) to plumb the poetic dimensions of the material in question. The productions were scenically stunning, enveloping the entire theatre in the material being explored. Twenty-five tons of sand, hundreds of bales of hay, and multi-coloured chalk were used respectively through the performances of these plays, in each case the material gradually covering virtually the entire acting space, as well as the actors’ bodies. The plays were structured very loosely, organized more in terms of filmic image than narrative line.

The reasons these earlier pieces are so successful is that they do not dwell on the abstract or symbolic aspects of the materials in question, but try to explore the more concrete and physical implications inspiring encounters between characters. The performances are not idealized or rarefied; they remain, literally, tactile and subject to unrepeatable change.

In bridging the creative and communal, the plays never take themselves too seriously; they are strongly undercut by self-referential metatheatricalism. For example, *Foin* begins with Philip André refusing to “play” because he “doesn’t like the symbolism of hay” (*Foin* 2). *Foin*’s “characters” bear the same names as the actors (Philip André, Lynne, and Amélie). When asked to play “characters of themselves,” the actors said they were very disconcerted (Collette and Gosselin); however, they discovered that the interplay between Daigle’s construction of themselves and their own construction of the “characters of themselves” became a driving tension in the creative process. The

play is interwoven with references to the creation of this play and to other Moncton-Sable productions. For example, Amélie, frustrated with Philip André's quibbling over the meaning of a phrase, says, "Oh, don't start with words again! We're done with that. We're in HAY now ... You have a real problem making transitions don't you" (*Foin* 12). Amélie is referring to *Craie's* exploration of various facets of writing, words, and literary creation.

Even in their very first production, *Moncton-Sable*, one of the actors portrays an "actor" looking for work and is told to do a study of the emptiness of time by observing the pedestrians on a familiar street corner in Moncton. In *Craie*, the playwright, France Daigle, is performed by one of the characters and disputes an aspect of the writing (*Moncton-Sable* 41). In another play, the director Louise Lemieux becomes a character. This approach has the destabilizing effect of breaching the boundaries not only between actor and character, but between performer and audience. The plays do not become rarefied, self-satisfying (for the actors) exercises in which the actors are the high priests and the audience the receivers of their interpretations; rather, the audience must play with the actors and are invited to join in the creative pleasure. This impulse is never lost, even as the process and approaches of Moncton-Sable mature and diversify.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*Inspiration Point* by John Garfield Barlow was first staged during the 2004 Notable Acts Summer Theatre Festival in Fredericton, New Brunswick.

<sup>2</sup>All French quotations have been translated into English by Glen Nichols.

<sup>3</sup>The Parti Acadien figures ironically in Chiasson's 1999 play, *Pour une fois*, which deconstructs the mytho-historical tenets of traditional Acadian nationalism in a postmodern romp across the centuries through the disturbed imaginings of Charles Lanteigne, historian, teacher, madman, and Parti Acadien supporter.

<sup>4</sup>The tensions between contending constructions of Acadian nationalism are demonstrated by the Congrès mondial acadien (an international gathering of Acadians occurring every five years in a different city). The focus on images of violins, endless portrayals of the iconic Évangéline and Gabriel, clichés of Acadian *joie de vivre* are regretted by those who would like to see more evidence of the accomplishments and challenges of contemporary Acadian society. See Allain 124-6.

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From its inception, Collectif Moncton-Sable has seen itself in terms of freedoms: freedom from the structures they see as inhibiting institutional theatre companies from real experimentation; freedom from the traditional boundaries of text, improvisation, actor, artist etc; freedom to create with a view to developing process over product; and freedom to challenge the audience members to build their own meanings from what they see. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in this context, they have freed themselves from the obligation to construct an explicit Acadian identity. When asked about this, they said, "At Moncton-Sable there is never any question about Acadian identity. We're making theatre. True we are Acadian; it is Acadian theatre because we are Acadians who are creating it, but there is no taking of sides or making a statement; it is not political." Although statements that their work is "artistic not political" (Collette and Gosselin) may be somewhat naïve, the important aspect they reveal is the desire on the part of Moncton-Sable to distance itself from the explicitly nationalist aims of early modern Acadian theatre. This company looks beyond boundaries in so many ways—structurally, artistically, culturally, and politically—and in so doing contributes to the construction of new visions for Acadian theatre and new dimensions of Acadian identity in a postmodern world.

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*Papier*. Théâtre l'Escouette. September 7-16, 2006.

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# Cultural Diversity and the Magnetic North Theatre Festival:

A Chat with Mary Vingoe, Artistic Director of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival

by Myrna Wyatt Selkirk

**Myrna:** When you choose shows for a festival, where in your list of priorities is cultural diversity? In the “Mandates and Objectives” for The Magnetic North Theatre Festival, objective number two is “to promote awareness of the diversity of Canadian theatre among Canadian audiences.” “Diversity of Canadian theatre” can mean a different thing than cultural diversity, but isn’t it part of the same conversation?

**Mary:** In choosing a season, I always start with artistic excellence. Of course people say, “What does that mean?” It is a very subjective term and will always remain so. I define it as originality of vision and quality of execution. Originality of vision could mean, for example, you could have somebody who is quite raw theatrically but who has something you haven’t seen before—a voice that is original, that has something to say. And then in terms of the quality of the execution, you could have an exquisitely executed piece that you don’t feel is saying anything new that challenges you. Within that there is an enormous amount of wiggle room. That’s where I would start the festival programming.

And then other things come into play—right off the top, the national mandate. I’m not going to program ten shows from Toronto, or ten shows from Vancouver, or ten shows from Calgary. I’m always looking at the whole. I’m also conscious of the rural-urban mix. In this country, some very important theatre has come from smaller settings. And then the question of diversity: for me diversity can mean a lot of things. Diversity can mean the way that theatre is made—diversity of form, content, approach—and it can also mean the ethnicity, or the sexual orientation, or the age, or the religion of the people who are actually making it.

I guess I interpret cultural diversity quite widely. I feel that it’s very important that the theatre in the festival reflect it in some way. And although the festival can’t do it every season—that would be impossible—I would hope when you look back over my five years as artistic director, you’ll see that a decent number of communities are represented. It’s not all work from Toronto, and neither is it all work from the cultural mainstream. There are voices from other ethnicities, and hopefully strong youth representa-

tion. Gender representation is something I struggle with a lot, because the festival is still too male.

**Myrna:** In terms of actors, directors, writers—everything?

**Mary:** No, in terms of writers and directors. Not producers interestingly enough. So I’m struggling with all those things. Then the whole issue of Aboriginal representation is also big—that’s also ethnic diversity, but it’s in its own category. Yes, it’s an ethnic group, but because we’re talking First Nations in our country, there is a political status there that no one else has, and I can understand that. It makes sense to me. The government has put it in its own category. I have mixed feelings about that. I think on the one hand that it is great to support Aboriginal artists, there’s no question, but I’m not sure how long you should put people in a separate category. It’s like women’s theatre or any other kind of theatre. There’s a point in the continuum where you need to fund something to get it off the ground, to make it healthy, and then there’s a point where you hope that it could be thrown into the mix. If it is left outside for too long, that’s not good. I mean, I would hate to see Nightwood theatre go to a different jury than anybody else—that would be weird.

**Myrna:** When I was home this last summer, I was talking about Magnetic North with one of our family friends. She asked what it is and I said it’s a national theatre festival and it showcases Canadian plays. She asked me if there are any native plays in it and it felt good that I could without hesitating say, “Oh yes,”—we’ve done plays by Tomson Highway and Marie Clements, for instance. Why did that feel good?

**Mary:** Well, because it’s our national shame basically. I think there’s a sense that we haven’t done a very good job serving our native populations. Therefore, anything that we can do to right that on a very simple level makes us feel good. Also, the wealth, once you look into it, really brings something different, something special. The point of ethnic diversity as far as I’m concerned is not about having different colours of the rainbow; the point is that it’s enriching the art form. That’s why it’s really really interesting, not because I want one of these and one of those. Unfortunately it’s not always that



easy. Tomson Highway always goes on about having white people do his plays because he wants that cross-pollination to happen, but the idea of appropriating native voices gets in the way and producers feel uncomfortable with it. But eventually cross-pollination is what you want, not what you’re avoiding. That’s what happens: different groups have culturally specific ways of seeing the world that are different than the one you start with, and they enrich yours. So doing the



work is about deepening the world view, not making up categories.

**Myrna:** You gave a speech at the Vancouver Theatre Alliance recently and came up with a few “mildly controversial things that you learned doing this job.”

**Mary:** Yes, the first one was that Toronto is a black hole. When you look at opportunities to tour and present across the country, Toronto is the hardest city to present in. You are much more likely to get presented in Ed-

monton, Calgary, Vancouver—even Halifax or St. John’s—than you are in Toronto.

It’s a problem when you’re trying to build a national profile for work. Nobody in Toronto picks up shows. Nobody has that mandate. Well, to be fair not nobody. The Theatre Centre under Franco Boni is doing some very interesting small scale work from “away.” His Summer Works Festival introduced a national spotlight last season. I think three shows were from across the country, one of which was 2B Theatre from Halifax. That was a good sign of something. But essentially, none of the bigger established alternate theatres has the mandate; nobody’s looking outside what gets done in Toronto. Some Magnetic North shows not yet seen in Toronto are the Electric Company’s *Brilliant*, Azimuth’s *3...2...1*, the Old

grounds amongst the theatre people who saw it. Although companies like Theatre Replacement and Mammalian Diving Reflex use a form of verbatim theatre, I don’t think you would see a piece this stark and unadulterated in Canada.

**Myrna:** You’re speaking exactly to our conversation. How can there be an enriching of culture when we’re—

**Mary:** We’re so narrow and we’re getting narrower.

Another thing I “learned”: When I went to Ottawa five years ago I was pretty excited—even though the National Arts Centre might be considered a little staid. The fact is, it is the National Art Centre—it’s still very exciting. So, you go in, and there’s French Theatre and English Theatre. Well, they could be on two planets. They might

**“Magnetic North can’t get funding for French-language work; French theatre can’t touch anything with English language. The mandates, and the unions, and just about every level of government have a problem with trying to bring these two linguistic communities together.”**

Trout Puppet Workshop’s *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, and Theatre Replacement’s *Sexual Practices of the Japanese*.

The “second thing I have learned” was we don’t have nearly enough access to international work. Unless you live in Quebec, you don’t see international theatre in the rest of this country. It’s very very rare. I come to Quebec and I can see international shows—and not just at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques or Carrefour international de théâtre de Québec. That doesn’t seem to happen much elsewhere. I know Harbour Front is struggling to keep a link alive in Toronto. Recently, I saw a production of *Aalst* at PuSh International Performing Arts Festival in Vancouver, which is now playing at Harbour Front. It was from a Belgian company called Victoria. This was verbatim theatre—that is, theatre that relies on actual found text, in this case the trial transcripts of a particularly horrific child murder trail in Belgium. The piece was expertly executed with real tension between what was actual and what the writer had invented. It created quite a controversy on moral and aesthetic

see each other at the occasional press conference. It’s changing a little bit with Peter Hinton. But they are so different. The way they create productions, bring in productions, move productions, their orientation—everything is completely different and never the twain shall meet.

Paul Lefebvre, the associate artistic director of French Theatre, and I became friends early on, and he’s a very outgoing guy, very interested in everything. He runs le Festival Zones Théâtrales out of the French NAC. It’s kind of our equivalent in a way in that it’s work from across the Francophonie in Canada with the exception of Quebec City and Montreal. We’ve been talking about ways to try to collaborate. What I realized being in Ottawa was that these audiences also don’t overlap. So we came up with this idea of commissioning some Francophone and some Anglophone playwrights to write short pieces to create an ambulatory piece that would be produced with Ottawa theatre artists. I thought, “This idea is really going to fly—everyone’s going to love this.” But in reality it’s very difficult. Magnetic

North can't get funding for French-language work; French theatre can't touch anything with English language. The mandates, and the unions, and just about every level of government have a problem with trying to bring these two linguistic communities together. I would say that there is actually a vested interest in keeping them apart—I don't think this is paranoid, I've begun to realize this. Certain parties and interests don't want their autonomy to be in any way eroded. I can understand the historical reasons for this, but what happens is a kind of a resistance to anything bilingual, anything cultural, that might involve two languages.

**Myrna:** I go to Magnetic North and I feel the links between the shows. They seem to speak to one another.

**Mary:** It's unconscious on my part, but I am drawn probably to particular kinds of arguments, particular content. The Tomson Highway play *Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* that was in Edmonton in the 2004 festival interested me as a play. It's 1910 and the Big Kahuna of Canada, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, is paying a visit to the Thompson River Valley and the Shuswap women are preparing the feast as their land disappears from under them. It's about a power struggle. In the same festival, *The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the aXes of Evil* by Marcus Youssef, Guillermo Verdecchia, and Camyar Chai was about what's being assumed and what's being challenged. In both plays, the actors were culturally diverse—but, more importantly, the messages were culturally diverse. Remember that bit that Camyar Chai did in *Ali and Ali* where the levels of security are like the Tim Horton's "Double Double" or a Gap clothing line. Newworld Theatre were using all the most common North American popular cultural references to describe the various security alerts put out by the US government with Camyar as the Middle Eastern security guard, and it was hilarious.

**Myrna:** Could you say what you're most proud of when you take an overview of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival in terms of representation from many different types of cultural communities?

**Mary:** In the first festival we had Marie Clements' *Burning Vision* directed by Peter Hinton. Now they, along with Paula Danckert, are doing *Copper Thunderbird* together

at the NAC, which is about Norval Morrisseau and his spiritual transformations of art and life. The first time we saw them work together was at Magnetic North. She's a Dene playwright whose historical viewpoint is very much larger than that of a single and relatively recent country like Canada. It embraces an older tradition of First Nations people and their counterparts around the world. *Burning Vision* tells the story of the uranium mines on Dene land and how they ultimately fed Hiroshima. The Dene had a vision that what they were doing was going to be a disaster. *Burning Vision* worked by piling one compelling image on the next, not by necessarily linking them. It was hotly contested at the time. Some people couldn't stand it and some people loved it.

We've tried hard to have something from Quebec every year whether it is in translation or is a children's piece that doesn't have spoken language. In the first year, it was Daniel Danis' *Thunderstruck* done by One Yellow Rabbit, which was a lovely combination. When I'd seen it in Calgary I just was bowled over by the energy. It's about a very dark, poetic, dysfunctional family. The Rabbits can be almost Chaplinesque at times—they love to sing and dance.

The reception of *Lauchie, Liza and Rory* by Sheldon Currie, which came out of Mulgrave Road Theatre, was a surprise to me. People in Edmonton had never seen anything from Atlantic Canada before so they were like, "What's this, what could this be?" It is a lovely show, but I think the audience also didn't know anything about the culture—about company houses or speaking Gaelic—so it was a new experience on that level as well.

Cultural cross-pollination is vital. It's not just about representation. Representation on its own is dead; it's like a museum. If it doesn't lead to cross-pollination on some level, why do it? It's not about seeing things on a shelf. It's not about, "Oh there's an Indian one, there's a black one." It's not about that. It's about what happens when they're brought together, when they begin to inform one other.

Did you see Johnny Harris's piece at the Newfoundland Festival, *Out of the Bog*? A very sophisticated person that I know found that piece homophobic. He told a lot of peo-

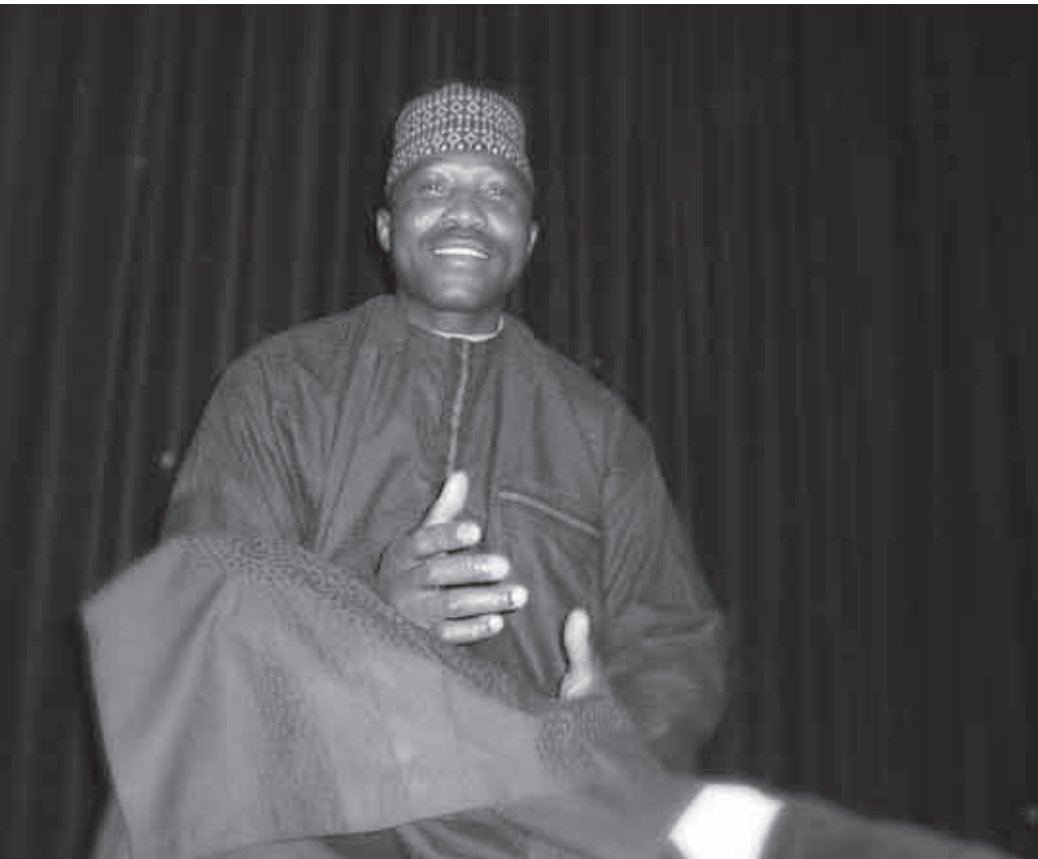
ple there that it was a homophobic piece. I was totally shocked by that. Johnny made a joke about a gay guy. It wasn't homophobic. A lot of Newfoundland humour is based on always being the underdog. They identify with the underdog. Maybe that would switch around if their economy suddenly turned around and they began exploiting everything. In Newfoundland there is camaraderie with people at the bottom. Gay people have been pretty badly treated so they identify with that. And there's always this sense, in fact, that the underdogs turn out to be the smartest people. I just thought that it was interesting that someone from the mainland, somebody who in other ways is so sophisticated, could miss the point. I thought, "That is a cultural thing—that is a cultural diversity."

Mary Vingoe is a director, actor, dramaturge, playwright, and producer. She is a founding member and past artistic director of Nightwood Theatre in Toronto, as well as co-founder and former co-artistic director of Ship's Company Theatre in Parrsboro, NS and founding artistic director of Eastern Front Theatre in Dartmouth, NS. A graduate of Dalhousie University and University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, Vingoe has, since 2002, been the first artistic director of The Magnetic North Festival: the national festival of contemporary Canadian Theatre.

Myrna Wyatt Selkirk is an associate professor in McGill University's Department of English Drama and Theatre Program, where she teaches acting and directing. At McGill, she has directed *The Merchant of Venice*, *Zadie's Shoes*, *Tooth and Nail*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, *Bonjour, là, bonjour*, and *Twelfth Night*, among many others. She is on the board of directors of the Magnetic North Theatre Festival and is presently helping to develop a student forum for the 2007 festival in Ottawa and a student conference for the 2008 festival in Vancouver.

# The Ethos of Storytelling and How the Tortoise Shattered His Shell

by John Poulsen and Abdulrasheed Yaro Lecky



Pictured at left: Abdulrasheed Yaro Lecky  
Above: Lecky with John Poulsen

The ethos of a people shines through their stories. That is, the distinguishing characteristics of a society can be found in their stories. “The Ant and the Grasshopper,” “The Good Samaritan,” and “The Hockey Sweater” are some stories that differentiate Canadian society. Even though the first two stories are not specifically Canadian, they do point to how Canadians function and what they value.

Abdulrasheed Yaro Lecky (Lecky) is of the Afemai people whose home is in Etsako, a province in west Nigeria. Since 2004 he has attended graduate classes in Canada. “Storytelling is important to me and my relatives, both past and future,” he states, “because we learn a lot of things from it. It is a way of perpetuating the culture and passing knowledge and cultural values from one genera-

tion to another. Any time we would go home for a festival, my father would tell a story and there would usually be a proverb, a point of learning attached.

One of my favourites was ‘How the Tortoise Shattered his Shell.’”

Lecky finds that his fellow students sometimes make reference to stories he has never heard of. “When they explain the plot I can often say, ‘Ah, just like a Nigerian story.’ You see, Nigeria and Canada have similar stories that reflect a common ethos of hospitable and friendly behaviour. Both cultures value the accom-

modating of one another. Also, both Canada and Nigeria value guests and the visiting of one another.

However, when I was recently visiting a friend here in Canada, his wife asked us to help with the dishes after the meal. Of course I helped, but that would never be done in my village of Auchi. First, one would never invite a person to your house and then expect them to help with the clean up. Second, men would never be expected to help with either the preparation or the clean up of a meal.”

The Afemai values he describes here are reflected in Lecky’s favourite story.

An examination of the role of the tortoise’s wife in “How the Tortoise Shattered his Shell” suggests that a wife’s identity is connected to her husband and her home. Even though her role is small, the wife in the story thus reinforces the cultural norms of the society from which the story springs .

Lecky has also described other values revealed through “How the Tortoise Shattered his Shell”: “Honesty and cleverness . . . are two values that the Afemai

"It is a way of perpetuating the culture and passing knowledge and cultural values from one generation to another."

hold to be of value, but there are times when these two values can come into conflict.” The story examines these values in conflict: cleverness is important, but the question of whether it is more important than honesty allows for reflection and growth of the listeners.

Storytelling then is the medium that transmits a people’s history and values. Oral literature gives the society—whether isolated groups within it or the citizenry as a whole—a collective sense of who they are, their origins, connections, and cultural continuity, and it helps them define or comprehend the world at large in terms both familiar and positive to them. But beyond clarifying cultural norms and values, stories pass them from one generation to the next.

Through stories the younger members of a group absorb the ideas that will guide them through life and the elders are reminded of the rules and ideals that have served their community well (Opkewho, 1992).

Before Lecky came to Canada, he worked for the Nigerian government in the city of Kaduna some hours away from his village. “It was not a good thing to live away, as a family should stick together, but I had to make money. Still, that which told me I was home on those times when I could get back was the stories after the evening meal. They are a formal event. My father would put on his good clothes, including his hat. Neighbours and friends would hear that a story was to be told and they would gather.”

The importance of storytelling to the African culture has been well documented. Isidore Opkewho, in *African Oral Literature*, describes the evening storytelling session of a home on the outskirts of Ibadan (Oyo state - Nigeria), where the family, even though it has piped water and intermittent electricity, traditionally gathers for stories in the courtyard after the evening meal. Oyekan Owomoyela, in *African Literature*, sets a similar scene: “The younger members gather in the courtyard to play games like hide and seek. On the porch, the entertainment begins with riddles. What dines with an Oba (paramount chief of a community)

and leaves him to clear the dishes? A fly! ... After a few riddles the tales begin” (264). In *Tales by Moonlight*, Ehimwenma Aimiuwu illustrates the actual beginning of the “stories that taught wisdom, common sense and morals”: “Efe’s house was filled like a thousand ants on a loaf of old bread. Then,

Efe took his place on his host chair, and as he glanced at the multitude in his presence, he said, ‘My friends, I greet you all. Parents and children, I salute and I welcome you all’ and they all responded ‘Thank you and we greet you too.’ After everything had quieted down, Efe broke the one minute and a half silence as he began the main entertainment of the day” (1). The introduction thus settles the audience mentally and emotionally, readying them for what will follow.

Lecky states that Afemai Storytellers often begin with a short introduction indicating the importance of this story to the children and to the community. They tell who heard the story and the importance of that person. They explain how this has been part of the Afemai people’s tradition from the beginning of time. This places the story in a larger perspective: this is no longer just the telling of a story, it is a cultural and historical activity. The audience is now part of the continuum of Afemai people, connected to those who have heard this story before and those who will hear the story after. The listeners understand that they are in a tradition larger than just themselves: one that unites them with their history and provides them with a tool with which to move into the future (Lecky).

A call and response is common to begin with.

“Children, I have a story to tell you,” the storyteller states.

“Tell us so that we may learn,” responds the audience.

“A long, long, long time ago, before your mother or father’s time, or your grandmother’s time, or your great-grandfather’s time, or even your great-great-great-grandmother’s time, in the time when animals could talk...”

**"The listeners understand that they are in a tradition larger than just themselves: one that unites them with their history and provides them with a tool with which to move into the future."**

Then the story begins...

*The Tortoise was very proud of his handsome and very smooth shell. All the other animals marvelled at how shiny it was and would often use it as a mirror.*

*The important event of this time was a famine and all the animals were suffering. The animals were invited to Heaven for a feast but the birds were the only creatures who were going, as they were the only ones who could fly to Heaven.*

*The Tortoise wanted to also attend, out of his curiosity and his desire to eat, so he went to the king of the birds and appealed for assistance so that he too could go. He explained that it was unfair that he should be refused the feast in Heaven just because he was a land animal. He appealed to the King that the birds should contribute feathers to enable him to undertake the journey. He argued that just a few feathers from each bird would not hurt the birds and that his ingenuity could help the birds when they got to Heaven.*

*The Tortoise was famous for his cleverness and his appetite. The King of the Birds yielded to his request and instructed his subjects to contribute feathers to Tortoise.*

*The Tortoise then suggested that they should all have nicknames, as they were about to go into an unknown situation. He argued that Heaven could want to keep them when they eventually got there, but with nicknames Heaven’s plans would not work. He argued that it was important, even in Heaven, to be able to negotiate. He spoke so forcefully that everyone picked a new name and the Tortoise named himself, “All of You.”*

*On the day of the journey, the Tortoise received a few feathers from each of the birds and fixed all the feathers to his shell and became more beautiful than all others because of the assorted collection of feathers. The journey to Heaven took them a long time without water or food to eat. On the upward journey, Tortoise explained that when they got to heaven, everyone was to be obedient. Any commands made by Heaven must be obeyed.*

*The birds finally reached their destination, very tired, hungry, and worried. Tortoise’s hints that Heaven could be dangerous made everyone feel edgy.*

*All the birds knew that they had come to feast in Heaven so there was a great expectation that food would soon be served. After the initial welcome address, they were requested to introduce themselves. Tortoise made a sign to remind them of their new names. All the birds abided by the suggestion and introduced themselves by their adopted nickname. The Tortoise*



introduced himself as, "All of You." Heaven's messenger needed to know who the leader was. The beauty and manner of the Tortoise suggested to the messenger that the Tortoise must be the leader. More importantly, the Tortoise had the name "All of You." Convinced that the Tortoise was the leader, he approached Tortoise and asked him what food they would like to eat.

The Tortoise gave a long list of food and within minutes the table was set. As the messenger was leaving, Tortoise asked for whom the food was meant? The messenger replied, "For all of you." Tortoise turned to his colleagues and said, "Remember my name is 'All of You.' Please wait, your food will soon come when they call your name."

The Tortoise began to eat. More food and drink was brought and the messenger continued to announce that it was for "All of You." The others kept waiting in anticipation that their food would soon come but nothing came. When the messenger came back to collect the plates after each course, he was surprised that others did not eat. He reasoned that perhaps the birds made it their practice to allow their leader to have everything.

Now, it takes birds time to reason things out. They knew from the start that something was wrong but it took them a long time to realize the scale of the hoax the Tortoise was playing on them. And then it took even longer for them to act.

Finally as the last set of dishes were being set before the Tortoise, the birds began to speak up. They said that they were being cheated and that the Tortoise was deceitful. Tortoise ate faster than ever and by the time the birds realized their mistake and were ready to act, the food was gone.

The King of the birds quickly summoned a brief meeting from which the Tortoise was excluded. The Tortoise was not bothered, believing there was nothing the birds could do.

The birds were outraged when they finally realized the enormity of the swindle played on them and a decision was reached that everyone should retrieve their feathers. Before Tortoise could speak, all the birds forcefully removed their feathers, leaving Tortoise without wings to fly back home.

The Tortoise immediately began talking. He suggested asking the messenger of Heaven to bring more food and that everyone should re-

vert back to their real names. He explained, he appealed, and he argued, but the birds had stopped listening.

The birds flew from Heaven leaving the Tortoise behind. In an act of desperation, the Tortoise attempted to jump onto the back of a descending goose to get back to earth safely, but it was too late for him. Tortoise missed the goose and fell to earth.

He landed on his back and his shell shattered. His good wife tried her best to help patch the shell up but it still took him several years to recover. Still today you can see that the Tortoise has a shell that is not completely healed. Instead of the smooth shiny shell that he was so proud of, Tortoise now has a rough shell with stitches all over.

The Storyteller now ends the story with a final call and response.

"So children that was the story of how the Tortoise Shattered his Shell... the end."

"Ah," respond the children, "now we are happy" (Lecky).

The formal story is now over and the Storyteller encourages an informal examination of the themes and lessons that could be learned from the story.

People use stories not only to survive but to survive with meaning. Anne Pellowski suggests that storytelling is older than recorded history and that it has been and continues to be an important method of education in many societies.

Opkewho indicates that stories help people understand who they are, the value of what they do, how they have reached the stage of civilization they have achieved, and what steps they can take to improve their condition. H. Courlander suggests that people have sought to relate their pasts to their present and to tentatively explore the future so that they "might not stand lonely and isolated in the great sweep of time or intimidated by the formidable earthy and the vast stretch of surrounding seas" (15).

But Lecky most vividly describes the immediate and concrete feeling left by storytelling — the sense of community. "The Storyteller is thanked after the story and then the people all leave; mostly together in groups. Often it is late and some parents carry the littlest ones; people disappear into the night

out of the range of the Storyteller's light. We all feel warm inside."

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John Poulsen is an associate professor at the University of Lethbridge in the Faculty of Education, with a Ph. D. from the University of Calgary and an MA from the University of London, England. His main focus is drama education; drama both as a distinct subject and integrated with other areas.

Abdulrasheed Lecky was born in Etsako, a district in the West Local Government Area of Edo state, Nigeria. He recently worked in Kaduna in North Central Nigeria. He comes from the Afemai people and is proud that his family has been farming in the same district for generations. Lecky is presently at the University of Lethbridge and expects to complete his MA in 2007.

All quotations from A.Y. Lecky are taken from personal communication.

**"People use stories not only to survive but to survive with meaning."**

# “FINALLY AWAKE”:

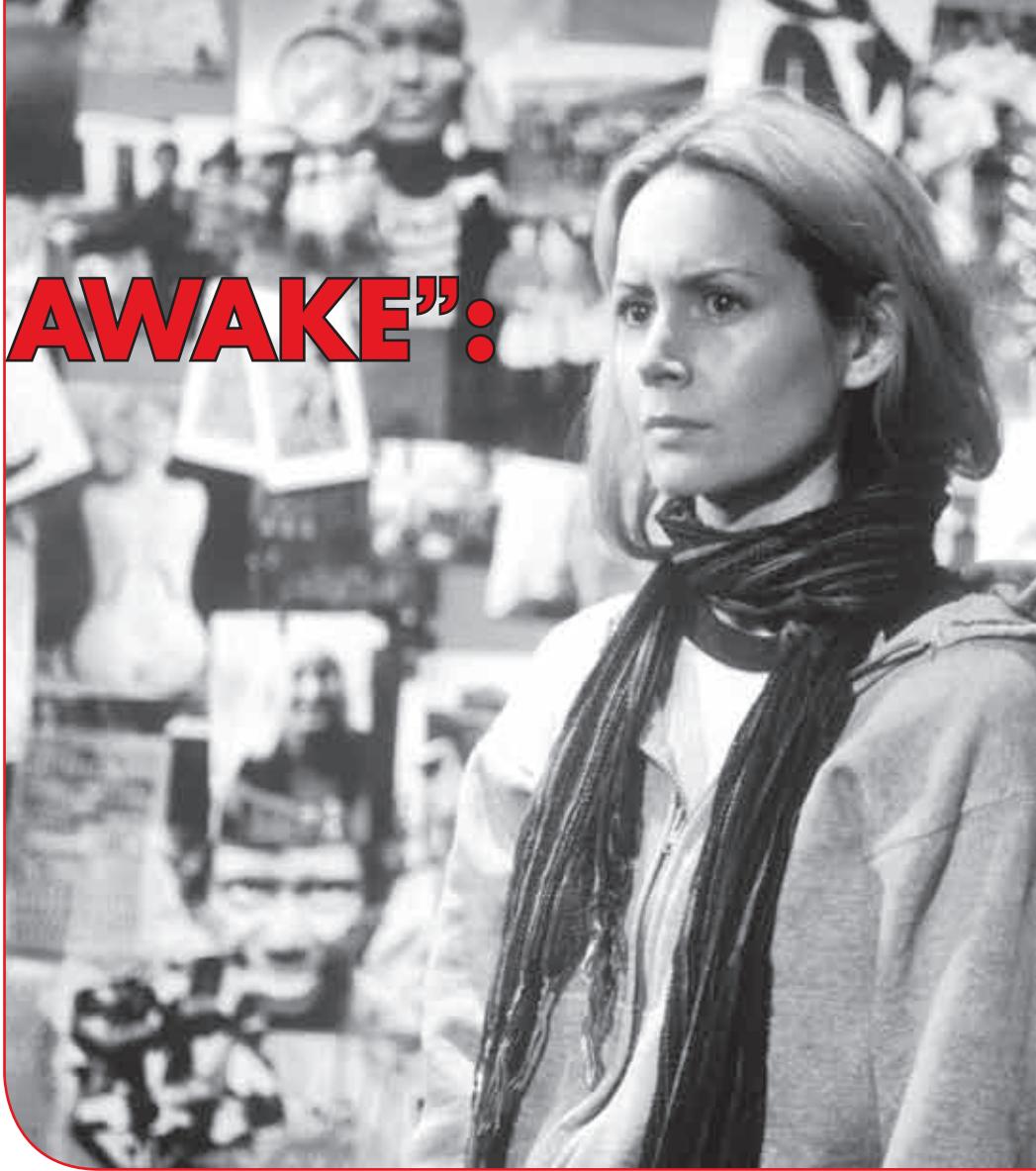
## **Rachel Corrie and the Politics of Coming of Age**

by David Kornhaber and Donna Kornhaber

**A**merican playwright Tony Kushner is certainly familiar with controversy. So it is perhaps surprising to hear this stalwart of activist playwriting declare, as he did in a talkback session following a production of Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner’s *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* last November 7 at New York’s Minetta Lane Theatre, that “there is only one taboo subject left in the theatre today, and that is the Israel-Palestinian conflict.” Indeed, if Rickman and Viner’s work is any indication, bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the stage in the US remains exceedingly difficult. The play is compiled entirely from the writings of the American student and activist Rachel Corrie, who travelled to Israel in 2003 with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) and was tragically crushed to death that same year while trying to protect a Pal-

**"There is only one taboo subject left in the theatre today, and that is the Israel-Palestinian conflict."**

estinian home from an approaching Israeli bulldozer. The piece played to wide critical acclaim at London’s Royal Court Theatre in April 2005, ultimately transferring to a limited engagement at the Playhouse Theatre on London’s West End from March to May



Megan Dodds as Rachel Corrie. Photo: Stephen Cummiskey

of the same year. But its move to the US proved more problematic.

Originally scheduled to run at the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) in March 2006, the play was cancelled with little explanation from theatre management. According to an article in *Variety* (15 Oct. 2006), Rickman and the staff of the Royal Court have publicly accused NYTW of cancelling the transfer due to “concerns it would anger the Jewish community,” while playwright Jason Grote circulated an open petition among fellow theatre artists calling for NYTW Artistic Director James Niccola to reverse his decision. Some who were party to or close to the decision making at NYTW, including Kushner himself, have discounted claims that the workshop bowed to outside pressures real or perceived, but controversy has continued to follow the production throughout North America. Finding a new home for the play at New York’s Minetta Lane Theater from October 15 to December 30, 2006, producers Dena Hammerstein and Pam Pariseau saw the

largest advanced ticket sales in the theatre’s history as well as a daily deluge of criticism: a steady, if small, stream of protesters remained outside the theatre throughout its two-and-a-half-month run. Mirroring the situation at NYTW, Toronto’s CanStage, which originally scheduled the play as the centrepiece of its 2007-2008 season, abruptly cancelled it last December. Artistic Producer Martin Bragg cited artistic reasons for the cancellation, claiming in an article in the *Toronto Star* (22 Dec. 2006) that although he was “absolutely reduced to tears” by the script, the play, which he saw in New York after scheduling it for the season, fell short of his expectations. Others however have called this account into question. As the *Toronto Star* reported, “Members of Bragg’s board were alarmed by negative response from influential supporters of the theatre, especially in Toronto’s Jewish community, who were canvassed for their opinion.”

That a play like *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* should provoke so much controversy is



hardly surprising, given not only its subject matter but its format. According to Obie-winning writer and director Robert O'Hara, who joined Kushner and English playwright David Hare in the *Rachel Corrie* talkback after the November 7 production, any treatment of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis that does not at least attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation is often deemed one-sided, if not outright propagandistic. O'Hara, who is best known for his 2006 New York production *In the Continuum* about the AIDS crisis in Africa and the US, joined Kushner and several other playwrights in 2002 for a tour of the Aida Refugee Camp outside Bethlehem and several other West Bank sites. The visit was eye-opening for O'Hara, but he has described it as difficult to discuss in public, let alone write about: "If you try to mention anything you saw, someone is bound to come up to you and say 'But did you visit this village in Israel, did you talk to these Israelis?' It's as if you can't say anything about the situation unless you've visited every single town in Israel." Such is also the case for David Hare,

the only one of the three panelists who has written a play about the situation in Israel and Palestine. At several points in the talkback, he declared that Israel's policy of what he called "de-structuration" was "bound for failure," insisting that the only possible solution was for Israel to consent to a negotiated settlement. Yet in his 1997 one-man show about his visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories, *Via Dolorosa*, which played on both the West End and Broadway, Hare was careful to provide a kaleidoscopic view of the conflict, visiting and speaking to inhabitants in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Gaza, the West Bank, as well as several Israeli settlements. The monologue was described by Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* as "a carefully considered report" (11 Apr. 1999).

Structurally, *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* could not be more different from Hare's "report." The play, as Rickman explained during the talkback, was inspired by a series of Corrie's emails from Palestine that Viner had collected and published in London's *Guardian* newspaper shortly after Corrie's death. Originally, the idea had indeed been to place Corrie's writings alongside other reports and perspectives on the conflict and create a multi-voiced theatrical collage. But as Rickman and Viner read the activist's prose—from journals, diaries, emails, and other correspondence provided by her parents—they realized they wanted the play to be entirely about her and entirely in her own words. The result is a ninety-minute monologue entirely in Corrie's voice and

first-hand about the situation, to somehow overcome "this realization that I will live my life in this world where I have privileges." What perspective we do get on the events in Corrie's adopted home of Rafah comes entirely from the first-impression reflections of the activist's impassioned and beleaguered emails and diary entries, composed in moments of repose between stints guarding wells from Israeli bulldozers at night or carrying stretchers through full-fledged combat zones. The picture Corrie paints of the situation is dire, and it is certainly one in which the Israelis come off almost exclusively, as Corrie puts it, as the "kids in the tanks." The play does acknowledge Palestinian violence—the monologue includes an email from Corrie's mother condemning suicide bombing—but Corrie seems to have witnessed none of it first-hand. For the most part, she speaks of her Palestinian hosts' "strength in defending such a large degree of their humanity against the incredible horror occurring in their lives."

If Rickman and Viner were attempting to craft a careful discussion of the role of international witnesses and solidarity workers in the military conflict between Israel and Palestine, such discrepancies might be cause for concern. But to decry the one-sidedness of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie*—or, as Clive Davis did in a review in London's *Times* (18 Apr. 2005), to declare it pro-Palestinian propaganda—is to miss the point. According to Kushner, the play is as far from a polemic as possible. "It's about the formation

**"By play's end, she has reversed her original position on human nature, declaring on the basis of her experiences that 'true evil' exists in the world."**

entirely from Corrie's perspective. By way of a multi-faceted consideration of the Israeli-Palestinian crisis as a whole, the play offers next to nothing (though Rickman has claimed he wanted the play "to present a balanced portrait" of Corrie herself). Corrie admits early on to knowing precious little about the conflict before arriving in Gaza, reading *Let's Go Israel* on the plane ride to Jerusalem and claiming, "I'm really new to talking about Israel-Palestine, so I don't always know the political implications of my words." Indeed, one of her primary motives in journeying to the Middle East is to learn

of a consciousness, about a kid turning into an adult," he explained during the talkback. "You start with this inchoate innocent and she just begins to cohere and cohere and cohere right before your eyes." Rickman consented to this assessment, explaining that in his mind the play is not so much about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as about "how a young activist forms herself." It is, in other words, not about Israel or Palestine; it is about Rachel Corrie. Indeed, Corrie's time in Gaza comprises no more than half of the total production. The first forty-five minutes of the performance concern Corrie's life

as a child and teenager in Olympia, Washington, using writings that go back as far as the fifth grade.

Much of the challenge faced by actress Megan Dodds, who originated the role at the Royal Court and played it again in New York, seems to have been the psychological—not the political—content of the play. Dodds' performance is a masterpiece of character building. With no scene breaks or intermission to assist her—not even another character with whom to interact—she slowly grows from naiveté to experience before our eyes. In ninety minutes, the cadence of her voice slows and steadies, her decided gestures become more sombre and considered—even the expression on her face changes from bright-eyed hope to what can only be described as world-weariness. The emotional distance Dodds must travel is enormous; yet the physical distance she traverses is only a few feet. The twin bed covered in books and surrounded by photographs on which Dodds begins the play as a garrulous highschooler in Olympia remains clearly in memory even as the lights refocus on the harsh rubble and concrete of Gaza that occupies the other half of the split stage. The world of the play is Corrie's world: insular, idiosyncratic, and entirely subjective.

Indeed, insofar as *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* deals with any country or any geography, it is neither Israel nor Palestine—it is the US. Though Corrie is perhaps more liberal than most of her fellow-citizens and certainly more actively committed to aiding the Palestinians, her world—and her outlook—is essentially middle class American. Early in the performance, Corrie laments how in America “the highest level of humanity is expressed through what we choose to buy at the mall.” Still, most of the first half of the play concerns her lengthy explanations of why she prefers certain artists (Salvador Dalí) or musicians (Pat Benatar): her objects may not be material *per se*, but she is very much engaged in the very American project of “finding herself”—of defining who she is as a person through her likes and dislikes. Even Corrie's activism, sincere as it may be, has the mark of an attempt at self-definition—of finding the crusade that best expresses her concerns about the world. The causes to which Corrie commits herself in her high school and early college years are as varied as they are noble: ending world hunger, saving the spotted owl, aiding the mentally ill, preventing the war in Iraq. Like many idealistic young adults, Corrie's intentions and ideals may be impressive, but her experience of the world is decidedly

limited. She declares early on that she had “decided to be an artist” and wouldn't care if she “starved to death.” Yet she is far from ever knowing the realities of starvation: her father works at what she calls a “neo-liberal job” and her two older siblings, Yale-graduates, have “steady salaries.” It is, she admits, a “doll's house” or “flower-world.”

Thus, even more than a political mission, Corrie's trip is an attempt to escape the comforts of the US. “I feel pretty isolated from the world because of my living in Olympia,” she admits in attempting to explain her decision to join the ISM. She wanted to become “finally awake, forever and ever.” Corrie begins the play a wide-eyed activist, convinced of the “fundamental belief in the goodness of human nature,” readily declaring that “if we all help and work together, it will grow and burn free with the potential of tomorrow.” But confronted with the reality of a world far removed from one she knows, Corrie is amazed at how quickly her worldview and expectations can collapse. “Disbelief and horror is what I feel,” she exclaims after only a few weeks living with a family in Gaza. “This is not what I asked for when I came into this world.” By play's end, she has reversed her original position on human nature, declaring on the basis of her experiences that “true evil” exists in the world. “I am disappointed that this is the base reality of our world,” she declares, “and that we, in fact, participate in it.” (It is, as Kushner noted in the talkback, an astounding reversal of Anne Frank's famous declaration “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are really good at heart.”)

The reality, of course, is that neither extreme position on human nature can entirely capture the truth of human motivation or human experience. Those who would take Corrie's declaration that “this has to stop” as a studied condemnation of Israeli policy—and more than that, as one endorsed by the play's creators—fundamentally misread the production. The situation in the Occupied Territories is disastrous and alarming, and on that issue *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* provides an excellent catalogue of first-hand observations of the horrors of occupation, from humiliating and debilitating checkpoints to unprovoked and devastating demolitions. But a careful consideration of the politics of occupation—or of American foreign policy (Corrie says at one point of her home country, “What we are paying for here is truly evil”)—this is not. It is rather a study of one woman whose journey from innocence to experience was tragically cut short. It is an intellectual and moral coming-of-age story, a *bildungsroman* with a

tragic ending set against a tragic backdrop. As if to drive home this point, the play ends with a harrowing recorded description of Corrie's death provided by fellow activist Tom Dale, followed by a video of Corrie at age ten delivering a speech on world hunger, flickering across the otherwise vacant Gaza set.

At the start of *Via Dolorosa*, Hare asks a question not about Israel or Palestine but about his own native England: “Must our lives in the West necessarily be shallower than those of people for whom the stakes are so much higher?” Hare, unlike Corrie, comes back safely from the Middle East, observing as he returns home “leafy street after leafy street, with sleeping houses, sleeping bodies, sleeping hearts.” But the challenge posed by *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* is the same: if the play exalts Corrie in any way, it is not as a champion of Palestine, but as someone who took it upon herself to leave her land of “sleeping houses” behind to try to see for herself the world outside—the world of concrete and rubble that set designer Hildegard Bechtler so ingeniously leaves just barely visible even during the Olympia scenes. There is a world outside the comforts of home, Rickman and Viner indicate, and though they remain agnostic about exactly how its conflicts should be resolved, the play they have constructed is adamant that this world must, in some way, be engaged. “I love you but I'm growing out of what you gave me,” Corrie tells her parents as she contemplates leaving for Palestine. It is that sentiment—a statement on our own relationship to politics rather than an avocation of any particular political agenda—which is at the core of the play Rickman and Viner have crafted.

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# The Politics of Play:

## WELFARE STATE'S SWAN SONG

by Clarke Mackey

When I was twelve  
I could draw like  
Raphael, but it has  
taken me my whole  
life to learn to  
paint like a child.  
— Pablo Picasso



Photo: Clarke Mackey



Photos: Amnon Buchbinder

Growing up, the kids in my family dressed in homemade costumes and built structures we could inhabit and destroy, improvising elaborate narratives for days on end. These narratives were a bricolage of current books, movies, and TV shows put through the blender of our collective imaginations. In the backyard, forts, spaceships, schooners, castles—all were fashioned from overturned garden furniture, musty old blankets, and discarded lumber. Later, when I worked as a daycare teacher, I came to realize that children—all children as far as I could tell—want to move, sing, imagine themselves as someone else, paint, speak in rhymes, and fashion three-dimensional objects with magic powers. This is the origin of art, and the desire to make art comes naturally to all human beings. Like talking, we just did it, without having to take lessons.

Somewhere along the way, however, most children are told that only a few people have talent and the rest of us don't. By the time they're in grade six or seven, they've abandoned those childish games and learned to enjoy prepackaged art and entertainment. But the fundamental desire to imagine and make things is still there and expresses itself daily: cooking, gardening, hobbies, family celebrations and musical jam sessions. I've come to call these unofficial, homemade activities *vernacular* culture.

Vernacular culture was very much on my mind last year as I sat in the bleachers of an enormous circus tent near Ulverston, a market town in England's Lake District, bundled up against the uncommonly cold winter, waiting for *Longline: The Carnival Opera* to begin. As the last of the three hundred audience members—children,

old hippies, townspeople, and intellectuals—streamed in, I could feel the weight of the moment in the air. It was to be Welfare State International's last show. This loosely organized gang of "makers" and performers started putting on "events" far removed from any form of legitimate theatre or art gallery way back in the late 1960s. Unlike most of their counter-culture compatriots, however, they didn't turn into respectable doctors, TV producers, or academics. The founders of Welfare State remained authentic anarchists, continuing to practice a community-based celebratory theatre into the new century. In the process, along with the Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont, they became the inspiration for scores of political theatre groups and events around the world. Companies like Shadowland in Toronto and Public Dreams Society in Vancouver owe

their origins to Welfare State International, as do the lantern processions for AIDS and Hiroshima Day now held in many cities.

*Longline* was their “exit rite of passage” according to Welfare State’s founder John Fox. Billed as an ecological fable, the opera was the culmination of a three-year “community residency.” Working out of a renovated architectural marvel called Lanternhouse on one of the town’s main streets, Welfare State artists lived and worked in the community of Ulverston recording oral history, songs, and stories; creating rites of passage, exhibitions, installations, performances, and concerts; organizing workshops, lectures, meetings; and producing CDs and DVDs. The purpose of *Longline* was to tie all these strands together into a final celebration within the community. Two weeks later, on April Fool’s Day 2006, Welfare State International ceased to exist, and the two people who were its driving force, John Fox and Sue Gill, became freelance artists once again.

The circus ring stage was surrounded on three sides by audience. The five-piece band inhabited the back quarter and, above them, a collection of circular and rectangular screens projected the slides and videos that ran as a kind of chorus through the show’s two hours. Using wall-to-wall music and a menagerie of carnival and circus techniques, *Longline* told the story of a rock in neighbouring Morecambe Bay from a million years ago into the future. Four other characters witnessed the changes of time and progress along with the rock: Jack, a fisherman; Gladys, “the dreamer”; and the ghosts of Sam, an immigrant slave from the West Indies, and the Blue Orphan girl, so named because she was covered in blue dye from a Victorian factory where she laboured making laundry soap. As the story progressed, the rock was swallowed up by rising levels of sea and sand caused by climate change. The other characters were subdued by the war-making institutions of global capitalism. In the end, as must happen in all celebratory pageants, the evils were dramatically vanquished and the humble characters triumphed—in this case, the rock transformed into a space ship. Jack, Gladys, Sam, and the Blue Orphan Girl all took off into outer space in search of a new life. The decision to make exiting the planet the only choice available for our meek victims of environmental and social collapse was just one example of the dark heart beating at the centre of this ambitious work.

How does one evaluate a performance like this? The visual images (moving sculptures is one way of imagining them) were astonishing. It was Welfare State’s *métier* to create

brilliant, heart-crushing, unsentimental images using the detritus of consumer civilization. There were moments of great theatrical power — for instance, when the Jack and Gladys puppets hold hands and sing a duet of friendship, their puppeteers and singers tenderly surrounding them. The score by Tim Fleming was exceptional in the way it spanned such a range of musical styles and emotional states, stepping a fine line between pop sentimentality and inaccessible avant-gardism, but never succumbing to either.

If I were to apply the shopworn standards used by critics to assess professional musical theatre, however, a few things about this production wouldn’t pass muster. For one thing, it was difficult to follow the plot, such as there was one, especially toward the end. The characters didn’t really have relationships beyond the most rudimentary, and the conflicts were black and white, with obvious heroes and villains. In addition, the pace of the show was very slow. There were many examples of what French critics call “*longeurs*,” when the action stopped so that particularly important sets of visual images could be laid out for the audience to contemplate. The narrator, the one potentially integrating agent in the mishmash of performance styles and modes of address, lacked the charisma to enforce unity.

To apply these standards to *Longline*, however, is to completely miss the point. Welfare State International developed a new collective artistic process that founder John Fox has called “applied vernacular culture.” Its goals were directly opposed to the aims of professional theatre and the international art scene. Rather than focusing on producing “great” artistic products that could be repeated, reproduced, and sold to a global audience, Welfare State International was committed to encouraging non-professionals, non-artists, people from all classes and backgrounds to not just enjoy or consume art but actually make it themselves under the guidance of professionals. The empowering of ordinary people to tell their own stories and express their own aspirations had a distinctly political dimension, as John Fox explained to me in 1985:

The aims are to release creativity. This is done through working with individuals who join in community events with us. But it’s also to release creativity in society at large. People have been saying this for years. Sadly the situation is still there. There is the same hidden curriculum both in school and in the whole society, which does not allow people to generate their own ceremonies, to create their own art, to believe that they can create for themselves. Once people start to have control over their own lives and over their own creativity, then they will not tolerate a repressive political nor any other kind of regime which stops them doing that.

These goals were partly achieved by giving people permission to play, because it is often in the safety of play that people can risk revealing their deepest fears and dreams. Process thus became as important as product. Under these circumstances, it would have been counterpro-

**"All children as far as I could tell—want to move, sing, imagine themselves as someone else, paint, speak in rhymes, and fashion three-dimensional objects with magic powers. This is the origin of art."**

ductive to attempt conventional musical theatre. Imposing those standards on non-professionals would have dampened all the risk-taking, truth-telling, and spontaneity that Welfare State was trying to tap. New goals required new standards, and any evaluation of a Welfare State event must ask how well their own stated goals were met.

### Homemade

Children plagiarize promiscuously from their immediate material and cultural environment, creating props, characters, and story twists from what is readily at hand. Similarly, *Longline* was a strange amalgam of seemingly incompatible styles and techniques: sand painting, clowning, magic acts, trapeze artists and acrobats, puppets of all shapes and sizes, a shadow play, fireworks, dance numbers, a community choir, pantomimes, monologues, and television animations that looked like the work of an anti-social six-year-old. The materials used to make the images, puppets, and props came, for the most part, from the garbage dump. In one deeply moving scene, a crippled, deformed cow made out of plastic bleach

bottles hobbled in slow motion across the stage in the aftermath of environmental devastation.

Near the middle of the second act, the cosmic clowns attempted to dramatize a thunderstorm using homemade noisemakers. While it was supposed to be a serious, climactic moment, they hammed it up with that slightly over-the-top, I'm-having-a-good-time-up-here posture reminiscent of adolescent role playing. This playful approach was also apparent in

however. There were a lot of people in Ulverston that week who didn't sit watching slickly produced American television shows or play violent hyper-real video games or go shopping at the mall. Instead, they joined together in a collective storytelling ritual

## **"It was Welfare State's métier to create brilliant, heart-crushing, unsentimental images using the detritus of consumer civilization."**

many of the other performances. And after a while it didn't matter that the narrator, cast from the local youth theatre group, lacked the authority of a professional. It was more appropriate in this context that a recognizably ordinary person should be the story's mouthpiece.

### **Doing away with the spectator**

When children play, there are no spectators. To watch others playing is to be excluded. Welfare State International was always committed to crossing and dissolving the boundary between spectator and performer. The band and lead singers were experienced performers, but the bulk of the large cast—the community choir, the teenage dancers, the elementary school kids, the brass band—were all local enthusiasts working as volunteers. The benefits for those on stage were obvious, but there was another benefit as well. For those in the bleachers, the medium was the message. Their children, relatives, and neighbours were onstage, all contributing to this community celebration. The message said, you too, you who have no “talent,” can make your own art right here in the town. You don't have to always buy entertainment made elsewhere.

The performers transgressed the boundaries between stage and spectator in other ways. On one occasion the clowns embroiled the audience in a dispute, dividing the room in two and getting each side to compete by making louder and louder bird sounds. On another occasion, Tyndale Thomas, an inspiring gospel singer from Manchester, taught the audience two different back-up parts to a song and then, Pete Seeger style, sang the melody over top.

### **Never the same twice**

Children engrossed in dramatic play shape the narrative spontaneously based on their responses to each other and the flow of their imaginations. So too was *Longline* a constantly evolving process with no fixed text. In the same way that improvising musicians use a simple repeating pattern of chords to play their riffs against, Welfare State used an elementary fall and redemption narrative as the skeleton to support the rich procession of images, songs, and performances that evolved within the various communities. The cosmic clowns and other performers were encouraged to improvise their parts based on audience response. The day after each show, the company would meet and hash out yet more changes. Some were significant. For example, after opening night, the performers decided to take their bows *before* the dramatic coda, where the audience was to process outside the tent for the final send-off scene, rather than at the end of the show. “We have to separate the theatre from the ritual,” John Fox said. This unconventional approach, discovered through the experience of performing in front of others, was much more effective.

On the third night, John Fox and the clowns learned that one of acrobats was turning fifteen that day. They quickly revised one scene to include a funky rendition of *Happy Birthday* while the unsuspecting youth was presented with a junkyard cake. The audience enjoyed the genuine surprise on the acrobat's face and were, at the same time, reminded of the ever-evolving nature of this kind of live performance. For most professionals, trained in the careful shaping of performances in rehearsal, this constant altering of the text can be nerve-racking; for Welfare State International, however, it was a necessary part of their creation process.

### **Coda**

Welfare State's experiments in process, form, and context have gone further than any others in pointing the way to a more empowering, embodied, and democratic model for cultural performance in the new century, especially among those who have been disenfranchised because of class, gender or ethnicity. No one can say for sure what effect *Longline* had on those who made it or who shared in the experience from the bleachers. One thing is certain,

that connected with their pasts and with the rivers of the future.

On the third night, I happened to turn around at one point in the coda. We were standing outside in a petrified forest, the moon almost completely hidden by unsettled clouds. An enormous papier-mâché vessel had just taken off into the heavens in a fiery blast of fireworks. In the quiet that followed, a delicate cradle of stars, conjured up through magic at the beginning of the show, slowly descended to muddy earth. People around me were openly weeping. Several couples were holding each other in their arms. I realized I too had tears in my eyes. What were we crying about? The beautiful lullaby sung by Tyndale Thomas: “The world's not upside down/Follow the plough/to the pole star held forever still”? The fact that Welfare State International was coming to an end? Or were we crying because of how far all of us had travelled from our playful, empowered, hope-filled childhood passions?

For more information on Welfare State International read:

Coult, Tony and Baz Kershaw, ed. *Engineers of the Imagination: The Welfare State Handbook*. Second Edition. Methuen, 1999

Fox, John. *Eyes on Stalks*. Methuen, 2002

<<http://www.welfare-state.org/homepage.htm>>

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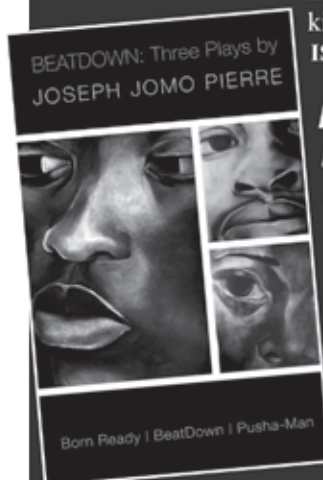
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