



theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

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**alt.**theatre  
cultural diversity and the stage  
Vol. 5, No. 3 FEBRUARY 2008

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by Edward Little

As the winter of 1971 drew in, I crossed the border into Spain with a guitar, a small amount of cash, and the clothes on my back. I was a naïve young man who had severely underestimated the difficulty of making a living as an actor. I was seeking shelter from the damp cold of an English winter and liberation from my most recent role as a “shovel carrier” at what would soon be a parking lot at London’s Gatwick Airport. I was travelling light—my backpack had been stolen in Paris—and I was looking for some perspective.

I stopped in a coastal town at the foot of a hill capped with Roman ruins. I soon fell in with a circle of young and politicized artists. They thought I would benefit from attending a play written by one of their cadre about the life they were living in Spain under the iron-fisted rule of *Generalissimo Francisco Franco*. The audience was by invitation only. My Spanish skills were even worse than my acting skills, but early into the first act I realized that this was an angry and very political play. The sound of “goose-stepping” jackboots drew my attention to the back of the hall where I immediately recognized the ubiquitous three-cornered hats of Spain’s Fascist Guardia Civil. Yet there was a nod to American cultural icons here as well, for each “soldier” sported a pair of Mickey Mouse ears and a huge wind-up toy key on their back. As the column of “Guardia” marched mechanically up the aisles of the theatre, the audience responded with amusement. I think I was among the first to notice another line of Guardia—this time without ears—at the back of the hall. As I speculated on the artistic merits of what I took to be either reiteration or juxtaposition, the mood around me turned to panic and I was abruptly pulled out a side door by my friends. We escaped through a maze of side streets.

By 1976, no one could deny that Franco was on his deathbed. There was widespread fear that the announcement of his death would provoke an immediate and extreme backlash against his decades of repression. The “secret” police (we all knew who they were) were everywhere. The Guardia kept their fingers on the triggers of their machine guns. Stories circulated about people “disappearing,” and we heard that in the town next to ours the Guardia had opened fire on an innocent family who happened to have been driving in front of the police station when another car backfired. We listened to Radio Free Paris behind closed doors — to get some perspective.

These memories were very much on my mind as I made my first trip to Cuba in the fall of this year amidst speculation about the extent of Fidel Castro’s failing health. I had left Spain in the tumultuous wake of the death of one of Europe’s last Nazi-styled dictators, and I was now entering

Cuba during a period of similar apprehension as near totalitarian power was passing from the hands of one of the world’s most enduring and charismatic socialist strongmen.

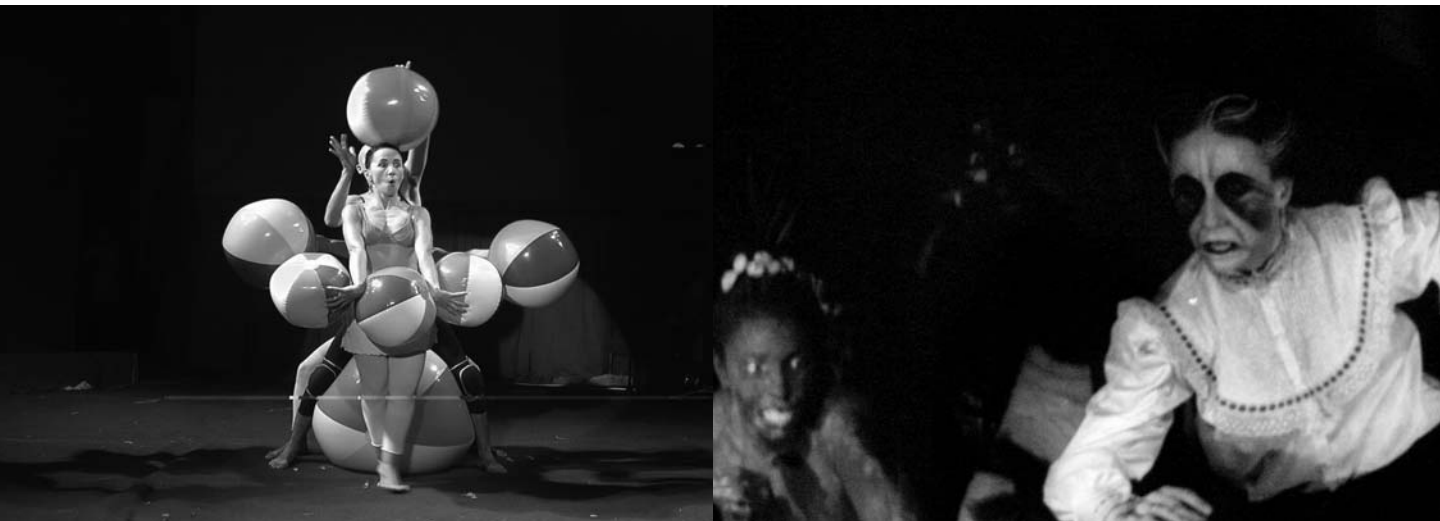
Riding from the airport to downtown Havana, I catch a distant glimpse of a high tower circled by massive birds. As we draw closer, I recognize both the birds and the sky-scraping monument to José Martí—*cultures are circling the Plaza de la Revolución*.

In Havana, I meet up with members of *El Ciervo Encantado* (The Enchanted Deer)—a Cuban troupe I met when they performed at a tiny but heartfelt International Theatre Festival deep in Quebec’s Laurentian mountains in September of 2007. The town of Mont Laurier hosts the Festival every two years. The festival’s jury—consisting of locals and participating artists—solicits input from audiences and awards various prizes, including Best Production. In 2007 the Festival hosted twenty-five productions from Ontario, Quebec, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, the Ukraine, Mexico, Cuba, El Salvador, Columbia, Venezuela, Belgium, France, Monaco, Germany, Italy, Spain, Morocco, Algeria, Syria, the Congo, and Pakistan. *El Ciervo’s* entry, *Pájaros de la Playa* (Birds of the Beach) was the last work written by one of the company’s collaborators shortly before his death of AIDS-related causes. The work is an intensely personal, physical, and emotional reflection on love, dignity, relationships, and terminal illness. A treatise on *illusion, delusion, love, and desperation as disease consumes personal identity*.

*El Ciervo’s* work is very physical and heavily influenced by Grotowski. The three actors—two women, one man—were nude save for diapers and headpieces of bandage. They emerged as mounds, shadows, and impressions from under tarpaulins of clear poly plastic. This is the same stuff used for primitive shelters, found at sites of construction and destruction, and often ripped, shredded, and caught on trees, lying in ditches or blowing alongside roads—cheap, durable, impermeable, prophylactic plastic. Cuban morgues use it for body bags.

The plastic encased, entombed, asphyxiated, separated, clothed, sheltered, supported, and bound the bodies of actors sculpted by inexorable forces. The work was orchestrated down to the range of the rustling, snapping, and crackling of the plastic. *El Ciervo* won “Best Production” and they spent their \$800 prize on essential office supplies and theatre equipment to take back to Cuba.

In Havana, I see a young dance company per-



*El Ciervo Encantado:*  
Mariela Brito Hernandez, Eduardo Vincente Martínez Criado,  
Lorelis Amores Rodríguez  
Artistic Director: Nelda Benedicta Castillo Mata



form a piece that roughly translates as “What to expect when you are Expecting.” The piece is ostensibly about childbirth, but in Spanish, as in English, to “expect” also suggests waiting and apprehension. The significance is not lost on the 600-700 people in the audience. The dancers strike me as very talented and accomplished. I am told that the quality of the troupe’s work has recently suffered, however, because the young dancers have recently become “*huérfanos*” (orphans). The company recently performed abroad. When they returned to Cuba, their artistic director did not. I learn that there are growing numbers of these *huérfanos* and that securing government permission to travel outside of Cuba can be time consuming, frustrating, and difficult. Returning from the show, I pass a number of open fires where caldrons of soup are cooking. These gatherings are celebrating the anniversary of the CDR (the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution), a kind of neighbourhood watch. I am told that the original and official idea of these groups was to “keep an eye on your neighbours in case they might need assistance.” Today the mandate of the organization, which is closely associated with government and police, has been simplified to “keep an eye on your neighbours.” As when I lived in Spain, it’s prudent to go indoors and stay away from open balconies when discussing politics.

Life in Cuba is grim for many. Open-air food markets survive, but ration stores have little on their shelves. You have to have access to Cuban



Convertible Currency—CUCs or “Tourist Dollars”—to buy food in the bodega shops. A small bottle of water costs close to 1 CUC, and a State Cuban wage, paid in Cuban pesos, is equivalent to 20 to 30 CUC a month.

Doctors and artists are designated as professionals and their wages range near the top of the scale. The members of *El Ciervo* travel to perform outside of Cuba one or more times a year and have considerably more freedom of association and movement than most Cubans. They bring this perspective to a body of artistic expression that is intelligent and accomplished, acutely aware of Cuba’s socio-political realities, and deeply engaged with the human condition. They embrace clown, street theatre, children’s theatre, public ritual, and hard-hitting works like *Pájaros de la Playa*. They are pissed off but they laugh readily.

I also experience this deeply engaged social perspective when I travel to *Pinar del Rio* to attend a conference on Building Bridges between artists and educators. Pinar is a three-hour bus ride from Havana and located in one of Cuba’s poorer economic regions. It’s also home to a university and a vibrant arts community. I spend an evening in a crumbling mansion turned art’s centre where painters, poets, musicians, writers, and theatre people regularly come together to work, think, relax, talk, eat, drink, exhibit, and perform. A stunning range of painting is hung on cracked plaster walls topped with elegant but crumbling frieze work. Tables with locally published magazines, pamphlets, and books of poetry line one wall. The room is packed and stiflingly hot. We sit on fold-out chairs to listen to poets read and to a pianist perform music composed for and warranting a concert hall. The door and windows are open to the street, but few seem bothered by the noise of the people, animals, and occasional vehicles that pass only a few feet away.

Before I leave Pinar, I travel with some others to the modest home of Jesus Carrete and his wife Carolina to visit their project *Amor y Esperanza* (love and hope). There, in a crowded room off the kitchen, five adults with Down Syndrome are creating lithographs under the expert guidance of Jesus. The prints are full of innocence, love, and hope. The Carrette’s pay for the art materials out of their pockets, and Jesus considers the collaboratively created lithography part of his work as an artist. Members of our group buy some prints—because they are good, and because our money will help support the workshop.

As Fidel slips the reigns of power to his brother Raoul, and as the powerful lobby that has maintained the American embargo of Cuba through ten presidencies begins to salivate, Cuba’s got big problems. It’s also got a helluva perspective on art and life.

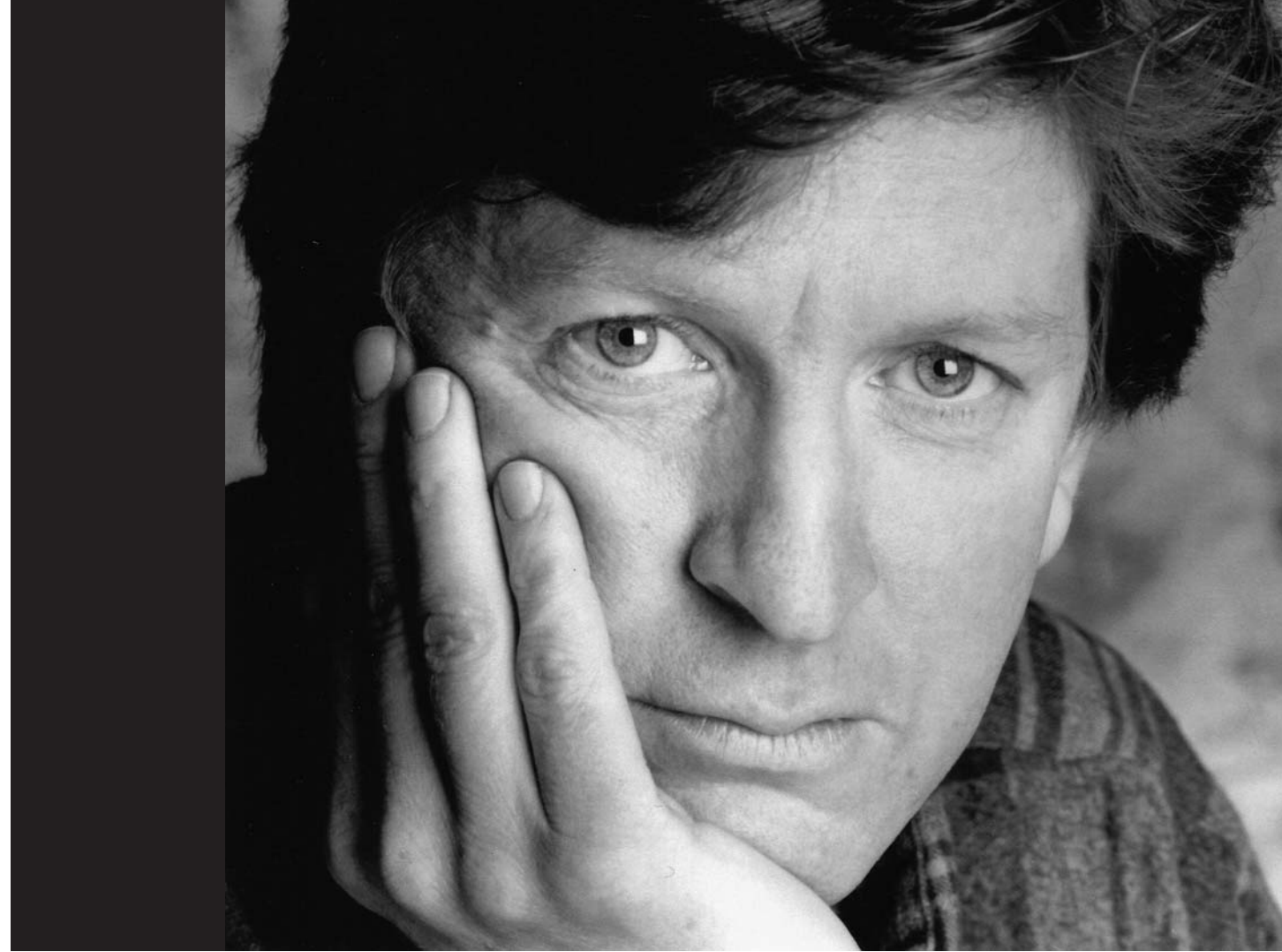


2/120 Proyecto "Con Amor y Esperanza" para Jóvenes Síndrome de Down NO EL  
24/10/05  
Pinar del Rio





1/5 Proyecto "con amor y esperanza" NOEL  
para jóvenes Síndrome de Down. 3/12/06  
Pinar del Río, Cuba



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## THE DANCE FOR DIVERSITY

by R. H. Thomson

### *To the heart of it*

When the diversity of peoples in our world is expressed through writers, film makers, composers, painters, performing artists, those peoples are exploring where they stand in the universe. Those peoples are collectively grappling with the mystery of being human. Without the artistic narratives provided by these creators, we are poorer in our sense of who we are. Throughout history, conquerors have imposed their narrative on the conquered. There is a reason that the history books are written by the victorious. Today, the attempted domination of world markets by business empires has been moving through the gaps torn in the defences of local economies. Among the weapons used to weaken local defences is the array of international trade and investment treaties created in recent decades. This movement of a triumphant market ideology is one that civil society must challenge. As a cultural activist, I say that one should no more subject a peoples' artistic expression to trade law than one would subject religious expression to trade law. Nevertheless, that is what some commercial nations have sought to achieve.

Trade law isn't taught at the National Theatre School nor at the Ontario College of Art, so why in heaven's name are we wrestling with it at all?

*An ad hoc global constitution*

Briefly put, global commercial agreements are rules for governments. Once adopted, the rules are binding and beyond the reach of elected parliaments or legislatures. Every government that signs agreements—such as (and I apologize for the following list, no sane reader should be subjected to it) the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) (administered by the World Trade Organization [WTO]), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)—agrees to govern under their rules. Rules for governments are called constitutions. A constitution is a nation's central document. I would hope that when a constitution is being created, all groups within the nation would be consulted. It is also my hope that the constitution of a modern democracy would not favour one facet of society over another.

Yet that is what the last twenty years of trade and investment treaties have done. In the name of generating wealth, the FTA, NAFTA, GATS, GATT, WIPO, and TRIPS give priority to the movement of capital, intellectual property, services, and goods across national boundaries. The advantage of mobility is denied to the working citizens of each nation. Also left behind are labour standards of health, safety, and wage minimums. So capital, services, and goods are free to advantage themselves by crossing borders at the same time that working people and the standards they have fought for are left behind. This shifts power away from ordinary citizens. When activists for culture, the environment, labour, social justice, and indigenous people demand a voice in the drafting of global commercial agreements, they are saying that all of civil society must be part of the drafting of the first ad hoc global constitution—because that is what these agreements are.

International trade policy leaves me gasping for air. But it underlies the squeeze upon the output and exposure of the artistic imagination. Trade law isn't taught at the National Theatre School nor at the Ontario College of Art, so why in heaven's name are we wrestling with it at all? As

an artist I can only answer that the arts have grown in Canada when there has been political will to create the space for that growth. That is simply the history of the arts in this country. And trade agreements are politics. The emotional spur to my answer was the 1988 federal election and the debate over free trade. I hadn't realized how deeply commercialism had embedded itself in our collective imagination until a bright wag in a business suit suggested to me, "Wouldn't Van Gogh's paintings have been better if he was compelled to compete with other painters at their canvases?" Every generation has its fight and I knew this was mine.

As a citizen I can only answer that I want things honest and I want things fair. I want the best for my country, but I also want it to be best for everyone in my country. I certainly don't object to capitalism and "free trade" per se. The human race seems genetically predisposed to exchange goods and prosper because of it, and who can argue with that. But the language used to sell free trade in the 1988 election angered me because it omitted parts of the truth. Accepting free trade with the United States meant that we were free to lose sovereignty over our energy resources.<sup>1</sup> We were free to watch our workforce played off against workforces who earned less. We were free to watch income disparity intensify. We were freely giving the winds of hyper- or un-regulated capitalism more power. The words "free trade" are spun words. Thankfully the concept of "fair trade" is slowing the spin, scouring away the wealthy promises and irresponsibilities that glistened around the edges of the "free trade" idea. Fair trade implies that commerce has responsibilities beyond profits. Fair trade says that corporations have responsibilities to the communities where they do business. Fair trade restrains bare-knuckled capitalism.

*The MAI—tempting depression*

Ten years after ratifying FTA and four after NAFTA, I was exceedingly glum. We<sup>2</sup> were in "Round III" of the culture wars. I was in Vancouver making a representation before a B.C. government panel looking into the Multilateral Agreement On Investment (MAI).<sup>3</sup> The MAI was the latest global agreement to be in negotiations. As a cultural activist I was not happy to be in the boxing ring again—civil society against business society—while our cultural industries were still showing bruises from the first two rounds with the FTA and NAFTA.

I thought I had made a weak case to the panel. Who wants to hear from an actor on trade and investment issues? But they seemed sympathetic. Several members of the panel recognized me from *Road To Avonlea*. Ah, how did the bumbling

Jasper Dale from the town of Avonlea come to be tilting with the giants of commerce? I told them that from an arts point of view, the FTA of 1988 included a badly flawed cultural exemption. I told them that NAFTA made the problems worse. I told them that the proposed MAI offended even the culture of democracy. Corporations would be given the status of governments (investor-state provisions) and hence could freely sue any nation, province, or municipality (unhappily they have done so through NAFTA). The MAI wanted their courts private so the public would not witness being sued by the aggrieved corporation. Or more accurately, the public's representatives would be present to defend the public, they just couldn't tell us the details. We would hear the verdict but not the evidence. Closed courts used to be called Star Chambers.<sup>4</sup>

I was despondent since the repercussions of losing Round III were serious. At the best of times it is a challenge for the lively, independent arts to flourish in an age where the major muscles of society are commercial. And in a broadcasting environment owned by a handful of business empires and paid for by the relentless pummeling of commercial messaging, it is next to impossible for a diversity of creative voices to survive. To then further increase corporate power seemed mad. Even the president of France understood. Chirac stated, "I want a market economy but not a market society." You must understand that in every commercial treaty negotiation American negotiators have been part of, they have tried to restrict other countries from fostering the cultural and artistic expressions of their peoples.

Cultural diversity, like biodiversity, is a world resource.

A number of Canadian activists realized that we could fight each round and perhaps win concessions,<sup>5</sup> but inevitably we would lose. We didn't have the power to prevail against the deep pockets of corporate trade lobbies. We had also made a mistake by defining our battle as "protecting" culture. It was a fatal choice of words given the macho world that had emerged in the 1980s. To protect implied that your enterprise was weak. And the weak were not welcome in the new world order. The strong survived because the strong were better, and in the new order, we were told, we only want the best. Debating the MAI in 1998 made us realize that we had to step outside the ring and champion culture, not protect it. We had to find an end game.

*Breaking out of the ring*

We needed to guarantee rights for the world's cultures. We needed a global consensus that the work of the world's artists was not to be treated as a commodity and subject to trade law. Diversity was at stake. Media empires have shrunk both the diversity of artists presented and the range of programs created. Cultural diversity, like biodiversity, is a world resource.

The sport of trade and investment treaty negotiation is a sport of weight classes, feints, and roundhouses. Yet even professional boxing is not so mad as to set featherweight against heavy weight. Not so in the world of global commerce. Small and middle nations are disadvantaged when dancing alone in the ring with large powers. The US has a history of using its size to gain concessions. In the 1990s, New Zealand wanted freer access to large American markets. Before granting access, the US demanded concessions; among others, unfettered access for US television, film, and recording products because the "audio-visual" industry (Hollywood) generates substantial export surpluses. Therefore, in 1992 New Zealand agreed to eliminate their regulations governing ownership and content of their broadcast media. The agreement was signed, offshore owners moved in (CanWest being one), and local content on New Zealand television has yet to recover. Their parliament had no say in the matter because they had ceded those powers in the agreement. They could recover them only by ripping up the entire agreement—and I suggest that New Zealand is not prepared to do that.

So in 1998, the end game play began. It was an adventure few of us thought possible. How does one create a global treaty? A number of us brought the idea to the Canadian Conference of the Arts because the CCA was thinking through future policy. At the same time, the Cultural Industries Sectoral Advisory Group for International Trade (a private sector advisory panel to the Canadian government—apologies for another long title) was also discussing this kind of idea. Ottawa had suffered cultural losses on both a magazine dispute and cable television dispute with the US under the FTA.

Political change is possible if the initiative is driven from *both* the national and the grass roots level. The International Network for Cultural Diversity was formed. The INCD was the grass roots. Artists and arts organizations were coordinated first from Canada and later from around the world. Eventually the INCD represented arts organizations in seventy-five countries from six continents. I thought of it as three periods of hockey. First period play would be to convince enough governments and arts groups around the



world that such a treaty was necessary. The second period would be to draft an effective treaty. There was no point working for a treaty—or “Instrument” as the governments liked to call it—unless it counter-balanced the growing obligations countries were subject to under the WTO. The third and final period would be to persuade enough countries to ratify the treaty. We thought we needed somewhere between sixty to seventy-five countries to give it weight, moral if not legal. We would have to win each period if we were to win the game.

Every language below me was silent. Every story below me was absent. The voices of every individual and every nation from the continent beneath my feet didn't exist in the programming on the screen in front of me.

The Liberal government was approached. The minister for heritage, Shelia Copps, a colourful, energized, and unimpeded woman, was forming her own network of cultural ministers first from France, then Sweden and South Africa—and eventually of representatives from sixty-nine countries. Ministers would meet each year, first in Greece, then Switzerland, then South Africa, etc. The INCD matched the ministers meeting for meeting, city for city. But the INCD meetings were earlier, so the suggestions and treaty drafts from the grass roots arts organizations would inform and prod the political level. The Canadian government was instrumental and stayed the course.

### *The night flight*

The British Airways night flight to the Cape Town meeting in 2002 was fourteen hours. It was a night of stars and moon. South Africa was an early supporter, but we needed broad support. It was important that African nations join the initiative. The treaty couldn't be seen as yet another initiative from countries that had television industries they wanted to protect. The treaty had to speak for artists from around the world. Hour after hour in the darkness below me, country after country slipped beneath the wings in the moonlight—Liberia, Ethiopia, Chad, Uganda, Mozambique, and finally South Africa. The in-flight television programming boasted “Thirty-two Channel Programming Gold, The Most Diverse Programming Available In The Skies.” As the continent slid below me, I moved through the channels. Every country that passed beneath my

feet that night was excluded from the most diverse programming available in the skies. Thirty-two channels of programming gold were in fact mostly American violent-crime dramas. Why oh why are we fixated on criminals being brought to justice each programming hour by actor/models as cops, lawyers, and detectives? In every episode another unspeakable crime is solved by actors with impeccable hair. There were several sports channels—American and British. There were several comedy shows—British and American. There was news—CNN with British accents. That was it. That was all.

Every language below me was silent. Every story below me was absent. The voices of every individual and every nation from the continent beneath my feet didn't exist in the programming on the screen in front of me. But guns were fired, bad men chased, tough talk made, actresses kept their hair pretty, and the murders were solved by the networks. That was all. Never had I felt the need more for a treaty to support and promote the diversity of the world's cultures.

Landing the next morning in Cape Town, I was informed that Bibi Anderson was not able to deliver the opening address and I was asked if I would fill in. I did. All I had to do was to tell them the story of my flight.

### *UNESCO*

After the Cape Town meeting, the INCD presented its draft treaty to the assembled culture ministers. Many of the ideas in the draft were supported by the ministers. They decided that the Instrument was not to be a stand-alone treaty, like the Land Mines Treaty; rather, it should be permanently housed at UNESCO in Paris. In October 2003, UNESCO agreed to undertake negotiations on what would be called *The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*. Whew. The drafting of the Convention then moved to Paris, and groups like the INCD became observers and commentators.

The delegates at UNESCO faced several challenges. Culture itself means different things to different peoples. To appeal to the greatest number of nations, the Convention's language would have to broaden, which would restrict its abilities as a legal counterweight to the WTO and trade law. The second challenge was to what degree the Convention should obligate nations to actively promote cultural diversity—both internationally and within their own borders. This was a contentious issue and the delegates were cautious. Sadly, there was a retreat from the active promotion of diversity. The third challenge was how to ensure that the Convention had legal

teeth and could survive in the face of WTO challenges.

In Paris, the US delegation was actively interested in failure. It is noteworthy that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice worked the Embassies in Paris as the Convention neared the conclusion. The US team's approach was similar to the US approach to the Kyoto Accord negotiations. First, deny the problem and the need for any international agreement. Then, if you can't stop it, dilute the language of the agreement to make it as ineffectual as possible. But on 20 October 2005, the final draft wording was voted on in the Paris assembly. One-hundred and forty-eight delegations supported it, four delegations abstained, and only the US and Israel voted against. It was a stunning showing of support, a moment of elation in a long struggle.

Yes, the wording is weak in obligating nations to actively promote diversity, and yes, there are grey areas of jurisdictional dispute between WTO

obligations and the Convention's obligations. But there was an overwhelming consensus in UNESCO that would at least carry moral weight in the upcoming battles. But now we were in third period play and looking for ratification country by country.

On 22 November 2005, I high-fived the Honourable Liza Frulla, the then minister of heritage, in the Parliamentary dining room. The Liberal government of Paul Martin was about to fall and Mme. Frulla told me that earlier that morning they had decided to ratify the Convention. Canada was first in the world to commit. I was so proud of my Canada that I leapt from my seat and smacked palms with the outgoing Mme. Frulla across the dining table. In March 2007, Latvia was the sixty-third country to ratify, and the global agreement on cultural diversity officially came into force. It was done. Only time will tell how legally effective the Convention will be. But that is another battle.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Under NAFTA, the National Energy Board lost powers, one of which was the “vital-supply safeguard” requiring Canada to retain a 25-year surplus of natural gas. In contrast, the US kept its own 25-year reserve for national security reasons. Go figure. Under the proportionality clause, if there were a severe oil shortage in Canada, we couldn't redirect our exports to solve our domestic shortage.

<sup>2</sup> Arts coalitions had formed in the 1980s during the national debate on free trade with the US. So many good players were in the ring for Canada: Sheila Copps, Megan Williams, Garry Neil, Pierre Curzie, Jack Stoddart, Peter Grant, Ivan Bernier, Stephen Schrybman. We were joined by many strong voices from Europe, Africa, America, Asia, and South America.

<sup>3</sup> Garry Neil appeared before that B.C. panel as well. He also carried the idea to the CCA and became an integral part of the INCD steering committee. He also made appearances before various Parliamentary Committees and government departments. Early in the adventure, when the odds seemed very long, Garry and I commented to each other that we would both be grey before it ever came to pass. Alas, yet happily, this is partly true.

<sup>4</sup> Private courts were actually first introduced with NAFTA, which included Canada, the US, and Mexico. The MAI wanted to expand the concept to involve as many nations as possible.

<sup>5</sup> The 1988 FTA did contain a concession for culture, but that exemption was seriously weakened by a notwithstanding clause and a failure to include any reference to future media.

### THE ACRONYM TWO-STEP

**FTA** – Free Trade Agreement (properly called CUFTA, the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, ratified 1988) **FTAA** – Free Trade Agreement of the Americas is meant to be an extension of NAFTA amongst the 34 nations of the Americas. As of 2006, no agreement has been reached. **GATS** – General Agreement on Trade in Services. A treaty under the WTO, it came into force January 1995. **GATT** – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The GATT first came into force in 1947 among 23 countries. Over the years, the agreement grew to involve 125 countries and was replaced by the WTO in 1994. **INCD** – International Network for Cultural Diversity <http://www.incd.net> **INCP** – International Network on Cultural Policy (the working group of culture Ministers initiated by Shelia Copps) <http://www.incp-rip.org> **MAI** – Multilateral Agreement on Investment (negotiations failed in 1999) **NAFTA** – North American Free Trade Agreement (USA, Canada, Mexico, ratified in 1994) **SAGIT** – Sectoral Advisory Group on International Trade **TRIPS** – The Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights. Negotiated in 1994, **TRIPS** is administered by the WTO. Ratifying TRIPS was a compulsory requirement of any country who belonged to the WTO **UNESCO** – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization **WIPO** – World Intellectual Property Organization **WTO** – World Trade Organization

### BIO

**R.H. Thomson** HAS WORKED IN THE THEATRE AND FILM ARTS FOR THE LAST THIRTY YEARS, AS ACTOR, DIRECTOR, AND WRITER. HE IS CURRENTLY APPEARING IN *DEMOCRACY* BY MICHAEL FRAYN AT THE TARRAGON THEATRE IN TORONTO, AND THE MINI SERIES *THE ENGLISHMAN'S BOY* FOR CBC TV.



## JOURNEYS WITH A SHAMAN: MARIE CLEMENTS TALKS ABOUT *COPPER THUNDERBIRD*

An interview by Alvina Ruprecht

*Alvina Ruprecht met Marie Clements in the foyer of the National Arts Centre on Saturday*

*May 26, 2007, the day following the world*

*premiere of Copper Thunderbird.*



© Andrée Lanthier

AR: First of all, tell me something about the laboratory of theatre and performance research that you opened in 2005.

MC: We had rented an old bed and breakfast on Galiano Island and we had such fun. We had people in residence who came in to create new works over a period of two years, so that every time they came back they would be looking at their work from a new perspective. It would not be a one-off creation but a continuum of creation from various points in time. We had about 143 artists of all sorts: photojournalists, dancers, novelists, theatre people, artists of all disciplines. Part of the idea was to create within our own conception of “disciplines.” From an Aboriginal perspective, the idea of discipline is not an assemblage of people who do different things. Rather, we feel we are all united by our commonality and not by the difference of our fields of work. As for the workshop, eventually this experimentation could not continue, but I did manage to get funds to disseminate and market Aboriginal and culturally diverse work on the internet. I came to realize that a lot of our theatre is “poor” theatre because we don’t have the money.

AR: You mean “poor theatre” in the Grotowski sense I suppose: no set, no props, no elaborate elements, you work in an almost empty space with nothing but actors?

MC: Yes, and this “Theatre of poverty” is not so bad. Of course, it is a curse to not have money, but at the same time, not having it makes you a more resourceful artist.

AR: If you speak of “poor” theatre in Grotowski’s sense, you are also referring to the shifting of the focus of performance from all those things you can’t afford onto the body of the actor which then becomes the main site of performance. Do you have ways of training the body that allow it to produce more meaning? Do you do much corporeal research?

MC: Definitely, as a performer I started out that way. Most Aboriginal performance, which focuses on retrieving stories, sees storytelling as an offshoot of our genes, of our bodies. Native people are grounded in storytelling and are able to access stories easily—they have them at their fingertips. They are in the body, as it were.

AR: Is Native storytelling done in a specific kind of situation? In the Caribbean, for example, storytelling is often the basic structure of a play, but that activity in the Francophone Caribbean (Martinique and Guadeloupe) is derived from a ritual related specifically to death and funeral rites.

MC: Storytelling comes from living. I don’t think there is a separation between one’s existence and the fact that one explains that existence and responds to it. Storytelling seems to be a constant dialogue between yourself and the universe in all situations.

AR: And the storytelling was a central element in *Copper Thunderbird*, in which you tell the story of Norval Morrisseau’s life. But it is more than a story told through words on stage because the central character is a visual artist. The play appears to be written and conceived as a multidisciplinary staging with much detailed work on the reproduction of Morrisseau’s drawings. Mary Kerr’s set and costumes and Tim Matheson’s projection design give the impression that Morrisseau’s drawings come to life—as an invisible hand appears to recreate the animal shapes on those huge oval spaces in the sky. The soundscape opens the space as well, with the breathing, grunting and sounds of contemporary machines and voices in the sky. The mixing of sound and visuals was extremely sophisticated here. Three actors portray the artist at different periods in his life. There is Morrisseau as a boy [Herbie Barnes], Morrisseau the young man [Kevin Loring], and the elderly Morrisseau [Billy Merasty]. It was interesting that Merasty alone seemed to bring a sense of ironic distance to his performance, but no doubt that was due to the fact that his was the only character who could look back on his whole life as it neared the end.

MC: That was Merasty’s own interpretation of the distance from the self and the way we experience our own life as we age. He seemed to investigate the realm of those ideas. Also, the discussion and disagreement among the three stages of Morrisseau’s life was a way of performing his own inner conflicts.

AR: And obviously the elderly Morrisseau, alias Merasty, he just sat back and watched it all play out. Actually, it was your comment about “poor theatre” that intrigued me, because here the storytelling and the inner conflict were represented by a staging that was visually very lush and expensive, not at all the “poor” theatre you referred to earlier. Do you think this play might have worked without all the sophisticated technology behind it?

MC: Probably. I think what is fascinating is that the work done with director Peter Hinton and Montreal dramaturge Paula Danckert could be presented on any stage, because those two are so good with the text. They understand the stories embodying the play. If all the lights shut down, if none of the technicians show up, if there was no audience, they could still tell the story, and I love that aspect of it, especially because Morrisseau’s story is a kind of archetype. This man is a master artist we hold in great esteem, but the story of his life represents the stories of all Native artists in Canada. His artistic life was a constant struggle. His solo show at the National Gallery was spectacular, but it took five decades for it to happen and that is a comment on the inability of the mainstream world of Canadian art to understand the work of Aboriginal artists. When



you speak of Norval Morriseau in the mainstream world, people say “Oh, how sad, how terrible,” but in fact if you understand his life, in spite of his addiction and his prison record, he did not fall. He kept rising and he kept transforming with each experience.

AR: Precisely, and we see this in the play as he is ultimately integrated into that syncretic cross that emerges at the end. It is partly a Christian reference, partly a ritual object of Native culture, and at that moment we see the man/artist as he becomes a Shaman. That transformative moment happens not only on stage but also

in the audience, as the public seemed mesmerized by the vision of the actor rising into another space, just out of our reach. The effect was very strong. I say this just to bring up the fact that Morriseau’s complex life experience is

If you understand his life, in spite of his addiction and his prison record, he did not fall. He kept rising and he kept transforming with each experience.

reflected not only in the text of *Copper Thunderbird* but in the staging process as well. The life of the artist is deeply entrenched in Ojibwa cosmology, and set designer Mary Kerr captures this beautifully. For example, a spiral ramp descending from above foregrounded oval shapes that dominated the acting space. Illuminated by John Webber’s violent and flashy lighting and Tim Matheson’s projection design, the space glowed with other world colours all taken from the Morriseau palette. Your artistic collaboration actually drew us inside the world of Morriseau’s art and prepared the stage for the emergence of the creatures from the Ojibwa pantheon, dressed in those bright costumes so central to the iconography of Morriseau’s work. Here in this dreamlike, mythical space, they appeared to come out of the sky and down the ramp to the stage floor, or to emerge from a bubbling underground cave. All these effects seemed to be the result of the painter’s shamanic powers, so his mythical creatures were able to enter our world and mingle with figures from daily reality. The images also referred to Morriseau’s biography—right at the beginning we see a huge projection of the newspaper article showing us the artist in jail. And then there was the stage world—the actors breaking through the barriers of the proscenium arch and addressing the audience as though we were also part of the stage experience.

Was this Peter Hinton’s vision? Did you begin by writing about the man and these images just appeared and fell into place?

MC: I think if you were to read about Norval Morriseau’s life and work, you would understand that there is no way I could have written a bio-documentary of his life, because the scope is so big and the palette so varied. The investigation became, “How do you get into an artist’s mind?” That was my approach. I started with an image and then the story came. I tried to find the answers to all the questions that arose from that point on.

AR: Was the image you began with that newspaper photo of him in jail?

MC: Yes. It came from research done by Yves Sioui Durand from the Ondinnok Theatre in Montreal. It was a heart-breaking image. I wanted to know how someone gets to that point after the life he had led. How do we encapsulate everything, from a brilliant mind, a person capable of intense humanity, a master artist, a man who has

been in the biggest galleries in the world, but a man who has also been in prison. These are huge dichotomies and few people could encompass everything in one lifetime the way he has done.

AR: You do add a lot of “magical” stage directions in the text that would appear to be extremely difficult to transpose into stage language. Many of these stage directions would almost be better suited to film. Were you responding to impressions from certain paintings?

MC: Yes, I think if you spend time with his images you understand that his work can be deceptively simple on one level and extremely complex on the other. Some of his colours are shocking and dense, but that is our palette. And you try to find your own vocabulary so that the images and the vocabulary can meet each other. As a writer of theatre, I offer my scenes to actors and they fly with that. It’s the same with the stage directions that are built into the scenes. They are an offering to directors to interpret the text as they wish. With designers, that is the gift to set designers. That is their challenge, just as my challenge is the text, just as the actor has his own challenge. I think we all have roles but I don’t view them as separate roles. I see this whole process as a collage where we are all building images and ideas together

AR: Did you take part in the staging process?

MC: Well, I am playwright-in-residence at the NAC, so I was here on a daily basis working on text with the actors and seeing the daily progress. And yes, there was an ongoing dialogue with Peter.



Billy Merasty as Old Norval in *Copper Thunderbird*. © Andrée Lanthier.





AR: You have worked with Peter Hinton before and I was struck by the different use of space in relation to *Burning Vision*, in which he had the audience sitting on stage, almost surrounded by the performers. *Copper Thunderbird* took place behind the proscenium arch and the audience was seated beyond the imaginary barrier in its own space. However, the staging still foregrounded the circle: even the structure of the play was circular because events returned to the point of departure. This work did embody the structure of the traditional story or folktale.

MC: Yes. In fact we had a discussion with the actors about this because our ideas of story are so embedded in who we are. We already know how the narrative begins and how it ends. We know the arc of the story, so there is no need to repeat it. On the other hand, the storytelling process in the Western mindset seeks out the forward movement of events that we already know so what becomes fun is not to tell the logical progression of events but to tell the story in between those linear steps. We create our own circles; we find our own versions of tense and time and space, but we still construct the touchstones that allow the public to find its way. We have those narrative touchstones but we can go anywhere in between. Still, I think that if the context is strange and challenging, those people who are linear will hang on to a story line they can interpret no matter what.

AR: It is interesting that some critics spoke of surrealism. To my mind, surrealism had nothing to do with your play because it was not a manifestation of the subconscious. I thought this mythical world emerging from the daily and at times sordid life of the artist produced a creative vision closer to “marvellous realism,” an aesthetic theory analyzed by Haitian writer Jacques Stephen Alexis in his 1956 essay “Du réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens.” Marvellous realism refers to direct relations between the transcendent world, including the pantheon of voodoo gods who possess the living, and the material world of daily reality—two worlds that can never be separated. Doesn’t that refer specifically to the complex relations between space and time that you have constructed in this play?

MC: I think we do exist simultaneously in many times in one day. At one moment I can be living in the present—“What do I do now?”—or in the future—“When do I pick up my kid?” The time that we formalize for ourselves is not true time. For me, being able to live in the past or the present at one time is not a problem, because we do it a million times a day. It is an important part of this play. I also think that it was necessary to interpret the world and dialogue within the world as Morrisseau did. That was the challenge of the play, to combine all these elements and carve something out of one’s belief. Trying to make it accessible.

But perhaps the real investigation is how do we, as native people, deal with ourselves, with parts of ourselves? How do experiences influence us? It is fine to read a great novel and see the work of a master artist, but how do they get from one point to another? How did Morrisseau reach that stage of his work? What really influenced that master artist? That’s the struggle and that’s the true dialogue.

AR: I must say that the dialogues include earthy, even raunchy, humour. Are these very libidinous spirits, or is this done to enhance the theatricality of the moment? I do remember Nanabush in Tomson Highway’s play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Does this language reflect Morrisseau’s relationship with the spirits because it is not a one that people would associate with Christian spirituality, whose tendency would be to evacuate humour that foregrounds the flesh.

MC: I think our ideas of humour are very broad. It doesn’t matter where we are placed, we still have a great sense of humour and a sense of survival. I was watching faces in the audience and I saw the surprised reactions.

AR: Did Peter Hinton’s staging bring anything new to your text? I am thinking of among other things the monstrously nasty and abusive white Auntie with an enormous rear end who rolled in as a giant marionette swaddled in shiny vinyl. The designers created this extraordinary creature who appeared to be both a threat and a caricature, the sign of some traumatic experience that must have disturbed the artist when he was a boy. Did she fit in with the images you were expecting to see?

MC: Both Peter and the design team had their own palette and I think there was a level of

caricature and comic relief that is a convention of the Western stage. In fact, Peter even brought in some urban camp. For example, when the two younger Morrisseau figures prepare for the Toronto art gallery.

AR: Who is that woman bathed in purple who comes in at the end to call up the figures from his paintings to come on stage?

MC: She is Norval Kateri, Lily of the Mohawks. She was the first Indian saint, and she was one of the important portraits that he painted. He had a special relationship with this portrait because she represented that syncretic relationship with the spiritual world of the Mohawks and she also possessed shamanic powers. Creating this portrait was a way of passing through reality and coming into contact with the saint. Morrisseau can actually talk to people and transport them back to him, through his painting. That is his shamanic power. Part of the play was precisely this building a canvas of characters to show the scope of his own spiritual world as it appears in his painting, a world populated by normal people and by artists and famous people from history. Even a dancing Picasso meets Morrisseau at the end, linking the artist to avant-garde painting.

But, did you notice that everyone is envisioned as an Indian, even Picasso? He sees everyone as part of his own Aboriginal world and yet he doesn’t operate within a system of class or race. That is what we strive for in this production. Our creative team itself was mixed and it represents the way we feel theatre should be. You know, the light in our world is made up of differences. Wouldn’t life be boring if we were all the same?

AR: Will Morrisseau be able to see the play?

MC: No, we hoped he would make the opening but he couldn’t.

*Norval Morrisseau died on December 4, 2007, at the age of 75.*

*Copper Thunderbird* was originally commissioned by Yves Sioui Durand’s Ondinnok Theatre and was workshopped at the Festival de théâtre des Amériques. *Copper Thunderbird* was provided final script development by the National Arts Centre English Theatre with the assistance of The Banff Centre and Playwrights’ Workshop Montreal.

**COPPER THUNDERBIRD**  
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\$15.95.

**BIO**  
**Alvina Ruprecht** IS PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF FRENCH AND FRANCOPHONE STUDIES AT CARLETON UNIVERSITY, AND PRESENTLY ADJUNCT PROFESSOR IN THE DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA. SHE HAS BEEN A REGULAR THEATRE REVIEWER ON CBC RADIO FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS. SHE HAS PUBLISHED EXTENSIVELY ON THE FRANCOPHONE AND CREOLOPHONE THEATRES OF THE FRENCH-SPEAKING CARIBBEAN AND FRENCH OVERSEAS DEPARTMENTS. SHE IS CURRENTLY PURSUING HER RESEARCH THANKS TO A GRANT FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL.





## WAGING PEACE IN TIMES OF WAR: WORDS AND IMAGES FROM A LEAF IN A WHIRLWIND.

playwrights notes by jodi essery. interview of  
aparna sindhoor and rahul varma by aparna sanyal.  
photos by amar khoday.

In September 2007, Teesri Duniya Theatre opened its 2007-2008 season, "Waging Peace in Times of War," with an original and challenging dance-theatre piece, *A Leaf in a Whirlwind*. This work sought to use the artistic beauty of dance, music, and scenic composition to tell the horrific story of a woman refugee who, in an unnamed country during an unnamed war, must come to terms with her own rape and the child conceived of that act.

*A Leaf in a Whirlwind* was adapted by Montreal playwright Jodi Essery from Malayalam writer Lalithambika Antherjanam's short story of the same name. Directed and choreographed by Aparna Sindhoor, *Leaf* was performed by an international cast which included musician Patrick Graham, Sindhoor, two Indian performers with expertise in traditional Indian dance and martial arts forms, and Montreal actors and dancers variously trained in Indian forms, tango, modern, contemporary, jazz, dance-meditation, and physical theatre<sup>1</sup>.

### Essery described the evolution of the project:

When a child asks, 'Where do I come from? To whom do I belong?', how can we answer those questions? What does it mean to be alone? What does it mean to resist? How does the body move on?

In the work of Aparna Sindhoor, the body resists by moving, and this collaboration continues to be an education in how the body stands up to the world. It would seem that the greatest resistance to the incomprehensible is truth, and in *Leaf*, the mother begins by telling her child the truth about her beginnings, about her history. In the face of the unspeakable, she speaks. In the face of political rhetoric, the refugees dance. In the face of death, the women live.

And how to tell this story? It is bodies; it is dance; it is music; it is colours, song, language, story itself. From the contributions of many, one thing. From many languages, many sources, one story. And in the story of one woman, the story of many. The process of collaboration on the *Leaf* project has been as motley as the sources assembled to tell the story. We began with Antherjanam's story, and Aparna's ideas about dancing it. Aparna also brought with her first-person testimonials about women's experiences with war, a response to 9/11 in the form of a poem by a woman poet in New York, newspaper clippings.

When reading Antherjanam's story alone, in looking at the world as only one person, it is possible to be overwhelmed; to see the sadness, the gravity, the pain. Those things are there, yes, and they cannot be ignored, they cannot be hidden. The gift of this collaboration on *A Leaf in a Whirlwind* has been to see that when we are together trying to tell the story with all of our various voices and tools and talents, we cannot help but also see the celebration, the humour, the continuity. And so it is that the woman in our story can be brought to life, to consciousness; finally, to the words and movements of her own story. It goes on. That continues to be a wonderfully unexpected path through darkness.







i would rather die on the land that gave me life than live without it and have to remember and now look, i do only that.

all my children are dead now. i stood in the courtyard of my only home, home that i loved, and it turned to ashes

all the girls were raped

i told them, take whatever you find but not the children, not them. they took the money. they threw the children on the fire.

my body was your country then, and such a beautiful country

and in this country, this country of my body where you lived when you were so small, there was a man, and the man was love.



we will construct families for our great country, made even more great through this forgiveness, this acceptance.

my mother-in-law told them to take away whatever they could find but to spare the children. they took the money. they threw the children on the fire.

they hit the men in the head with pipes. they took the girls into the street and stripped off our clothes.

we are still alive.



i am still alive  
i am still alive  
i am still alive  
i am still alive

twenty, twenty five men would have their turn

sometimes these were men from the mob.  
other times the police.





i saw the old god of war stand in a  
bog between chasm and rockface.  
he smelled of free beer and carbolic  
and showed his testicles to adolescents,  
for he had been rejuvenated by several  
professors. in a hoarse, wolfish  
voice he declared his love for every-  
thing young. nearby stood a pregnant  
woman, trembling. and without  
shame he talked on and presented  
himself as a great one for order.  
and he described how everywhere he  
put barns in order, by emptying them.  
and as one throws crumbs to  
sparrows, he fed poor people with  
crusts of bread, which he had taken  
away from poor people. his voice  
was now loud, now soft, but always  
hoarse. in a loud voice he spoke of  
great times to come and in a soft  
voice he taught the woman how to  
cook crows and seagulls. meanwhile  
his back was unquiet and he kept look-  
ing round, as though afraid of being  
stabbed. and every five minutes he  
assured his public that he would take  
up very little of their time.



these children that your women bear now: even these are  
the citizens of this country and as the citizens of this  
country you must be prepared to welcome them yes  
even as they are born from the seed of our enemy.

and a great wind came  
that took the leaf  
to the place where you became

when i wake, i remember



## Interview with Aparna Sindhoor and Rahul Varma by Aparna Sanyal<sup>2</sup>

**A. SANYAL:** Aparna, you are considered a pioneer of the dance theatre form, of which *A Leaf in a Whirlwind* is an example. Could you explain how this form differs from conventional theatre? And what makes your work distinct?

**A. SINDHOOR:** The term dance theatre is used in different ways, but for me it is theatre, with all its elements, heavily loaded with dance. Conventional theatre has people playing fixed characters, while in my work I go in and out of several characters. I mainly work with women's stories, and I can't come to terms with self-obsessed dancing. This may be due to my bharatnatyam training, which allows me to be a solo performer while changing roles.

But if I need to tell the story of a woman who is raped, or in a refugee camp (as in *A Leaf in a Whirlwind*), conventional bharatnatyam techniques are not enough. The roles traditionally given in bharatnatyam involve a woman pining for a man, who eventually becomes God. I need to explore beyond that. That's where I use other theatrical techniques like martial arts, yoga, singing, speaking, jumping, cart wheeling. The notion of a woman expressing her own sensuality was a no-no in bharatnatyam for a long time, though not originally; I want to reclaim those things, and add my own vision of movement.

**R. VARMA:** I see great potential for this art form. It's new primarily because it involves a new aesthetic and adds to our identity. It challenges the linearity of drama. It uses and converges many styles, which communicates an idea through beauty and artistry. That is what makes her art distinct.

**A. SANYAL:** Tell me about the origins of *A Leaf in a Whirlwind*.

**A. SINDHOOR:** My husband had written haikus on refugees, and I was working on a piece called "Refugee Ragas." I was reading a lot of literature on refugees when I happened to see the story (*A Leaf in a Whirlwind*) by Lalithambika Antherjanam. She is from Kerala, from a traditional Brahmin family, and grew up secluded from the rest of the world. She is a very powerful writer, but it all comes from her life. Then suddenly there is this one story which is about the India-Pakistan partition. I don't think she, as a South Indian person, went through the same experiences as a person in Punjab who crossed the border. But she has written it as though she was in the camp. Well, I thought, this could be the final big piece about war and women.

I collected a lot of testimony from women in Gujarat, in Palestine—not personally, but through interviews and books—and I thought the story was open enough that I could set it in any refugee camp. Now it is set in a camp with different men and women telling their stories. But there is one main story of a woman who is pregnant through a rape caused by the war. She is trying to kill the baby. Eventually, she decides to give birth to her daughter and change the world.

**R. VARMA:** I think the idea of focusing on war through the perspective of peace kept getting stronger at Teesri. When George Bush's war broke out, we decided to "stage peace in times of war." As an artistic director, I am interested in doing something others choose not to do. I am disturbed by the arts scene, which recreates the same sensationalism and soap operas. Every war has an effect which is hardly talked about — its effect on women and children. Hollywood is fixated on a macho perspective: destroying a country and coming back to a hero's welcome. What about children who have been destroyed, women who have been raped or enslaved for sexual purposes? Why is it that in every war a woman's body becomes a battleground? Rwanda, Bosnia, India-Pakistan...it just keeps happening. It's a dark subject. And Aparna's form is the best for handling subjects of this dark nature, by telling stories of justice, stories of survival, through the prism of beauty.

**A. SANYAL:** Lastly, what has your experience in Canada, and with Teesri Duniya Theatre, been like?

**A. SINDHOOR:** We feel the quality of audience in Montreal is very good. And in general, with Teesri, there is this sense of wanting to do the best artistically. This is why I have put myself here. I like the fact that the majority of the words are in English, but none of us, none of the dancers, are native English speakers. This is very beautiful for me, in terms of the different accents. Most of the time when I'm on stage, I'm the only one with an accent. And Teesri is like my second family.

**R. VARMA:** For me, this is a deeply emotional event. It is the first time in the history of Teesri—twenty-five years—that our major play is being directed by a woman of colour.

## A Leaf in a Whirlwind

October 10 – 28, 2007

**MAI**

(Montréal arts interculturels)

Produced by Teesri Duniya Theatre

Co-presented by MAI

**Director and Choreographer** Aparna Sindhoor

**Adaptation** Jodi Essery (based on an original story by Lalithambika Antherjanam)

**Performers** Anil Natyaveda, Pratheesh Sivanandan, Aparna Sindhoor, Marjolayne Auger, Tomomi Morimoto, Michelle Parent

**Set and Lighting Design** Noush Anand

**Music** Patrick Graham, Jean-François Garneau

For more information about *A Leaf in a Whirlwind* and its contributing artists, visit:  
[www.teesriduniya.com](http://www.teesriduniya.com)

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> During the initial months of the project, Laurie Stevens served as dramaturge. The project also held a 3-day workshop with musician Patrick Graham and a group of local dancers.

<sup>2</sup> The interview took place on 20 September 2007 at the Bharat Bhavan Community Centre in the St. Henri neighbourhood of Montreal.

**Jodi Essery** IS A CO-FOUNDER OF INTERNATIONAL DEVISING ENSEMBLE SABOOGUE THEATRE. CURRENT THEATRE COLLABORATIONS INCLUDE TALYA RUBIN'S *THE GIRL WITH NO HANDS* FOR SUMMERWORKS 2008 AND NEW WRITING WITH GESAMPKUNSTWERK THEATRE. JODI IS COMPLETING AN MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH UBC'S OPTIONAL RESIDENCY PROGRAM.

**Amar Khoday** SPECIALIZES IN DANCE AND PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY. HIS WORK IS FEATURED AT [WWW.ATKPHOTOWORKS.COM](http://WWW.ATKPHOTOWORKS.COM). AMAR IS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE LAW SOCIETY OF UPPER CANADA AND THE MASSACHUSETTS BAR. HE IS CURRENTLY PURSUING DOCTORAL STUDIES IN LAW AT MCGILL UNIVERSITY.

**Aparna Sanyal** IS A FREELANCE WRITER IN MONTREAL. SHE HAS PUBLISHED ARTICLES IN THE *MONTREAL REVIEW OF BOOKS* AND *BOOKS IN CANADA* AND IS CURRENTLY AT WORK ON A NOVEL ENTITLED "THE GUEST IN ROOM 51."



Anusree Roy in *Letters to my Grandma* © Caralin Ruth

# RECOGNIZING THE BOUNDARIES OF CULTURAL EXCHANGE: FOOT 2007, “DISSOLVING BORDERS”

by Katherine Foster

The Festival of Original Theatre (FOOT) is an annual, student-run conference and performance festival produced at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto. It creates discussion between scholars and practitioners by means of scholarly papers, panels, artistic roundtables, workshops, staged readings, and original performances. Founded in 1993, FOOT has addressed themes such as “Metaphor and Metonymy: The Language of Theatre and Film,” “The Dramaturge in Collective Creation,” “Bodies in Space,” and “Performing Adaptation.”

Under the artistic direction of Kate Hodgert, Jacqueline Taucar, and myself, FOOT 2007 approached the theme of cultural exchange in theatrical practice. Structured to combine academic presentations and original performance, the festival opened with a keynote address followed by a performance of Anusree Roy’s *Letters to my Grandma* and an audience talk-back session. Day Two consisted of an academic paper session in the morning and an artistic panel in the afternoon in which local theatre artists were invited to discuss their work in relation to the festival theme. The evening program included two performances written and directed by students from the Graduate Centre: *Playground* by Thomas Morgan Jones and *That Indescribable Life* by Jessica Glanfield, again followed by an audience talk-back. The last day included two academic paper sessions and evening performances by artists based outside of Toronto: *Gramma* by Maki Yi and *Re-Imagining Yellow* by Phyllis Wong, Cynthia Chwen-Woan Kuan, and Jen Yin Lin. The combined presentational and performance format was intended to create a space for the examination of cultural exchange in theatre, to “dissolve the borders” within the discourse in order to address the ever-expanding definitions of culture and what constitutes a cultural group in theatre.

As a graduate student studying theatre in a culturally diverse city, I felt that choosing the discourse of cultural exchange as the theme was imperative and long overdue. What I did not anticipate was the degree to which the concept of borders would become the focus of the discussions: What is suggested by the notion of dissolving borders? How are these borders defined? To what degree are they physical barriers or imaginary constructs? What role do these borders play within *inter-/intra-/multi-* and *trans-cultural* theatrical discourse? These are the questions that repeatedly came to my mind, and although they were not necessarily answered explicitly, they were dealt with in an implicit manner throughout the discussions, presentations, and performances.

The subject of cultural exchange acknowledges the connections among artists across geographical borders while at the same time recognizing the uniqueness that derives from cultural difference. Theatrical practice that attempts to address, or has been influenced by, issues of difference and diversity is fostered through the awareness of these commonalities and a celebration of distinct qualities that arise from specific cultural attitudes. Intercultural, intracultural, multicultural, and transcultural are theoretical terms that have been used in theatrical discourse to analyze various approaches to cultural exchange. The past ten years have seen considerable debate over the definitions and understanding of these terms from both a theoretical and practical standpoint.

Patrice Pavis’s distinctions, from *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, have provided me with a framework for understanding cultural exchange in theatre and how these terms might function in the discussion FOOT was aiming to stimulate. According to Pavis, *intercultural* theatre “creates hybrid forms drawing upon a more or less voluntary mixing of performance traditions traceable to distinct cultural areas. The hybridization is very often such that the original forms can no longer be distinguished” (8). A correlative of intercultural theatre, *intracultural* theatre “refers to the search for national traditions, often forgotten, corrupted or repressed, in order to reassess the sources of a style of performance, to situate it better in relation to external influences and to understand more deeply the origins and the transformation of its own culture” (5-6). Pavis’s *multicultural* theatre has a more explicitly political foundation:

The cross-influences between various ethnic or linguistic groups in multicultural societies (e.g., Australia, Canada) have been the source of performances utilizing several languages and performing for a bi- or multi-cultural public [. . .]. This sort of exchange is only possible when the political system in place recognizes, if only on paper, the existence of cultural or national communities and encourages their cooperation, without hiding behind the shibboleth of national identity.(8)

And finally, *transcultural* theatre, concerned with the universality of the human condition, transcends particular cultures and is “concerned with particularities and traditions only in order to grasp more effectively what they have in common and what is not reducible to a specific culture” (6). Toronto is home to many theatre companies that create intercultural, intracultural, multicultural, or transcultural work, companies such as fu-Gen Asian-Canadian Theatre Company, Native Earth Performing Arts, Obsidian Theatre Company, Cahoots Theatre Projects, Modern Times Stage Company, Carlos Bulosan Theatre, Theatrefront, and Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble. Each company has a specific view of what these terms mean when making theatre; and each company’s place within the theatre community is influenced by how it defines its work, how it participates in cultural exchange, and which borders its work challenges, shifts, crosses, or creates.

In his keynote address to the festival, entitled “Multicultural Text, Intercultural Performance,” Professor Ric Knowles explored the “intercultural performance ecology of contemporary Toronto within the context of Canada’s official multicultural script, its history, and its ongoing influence.” In proposing the ways in which Toronto-based



companies engage in a “grass-roots” interculturalism distinct from European understandings of intercultural performance, Knowles suggested that they have created a way to challenge and work within the institutional borders established by the “idealism of Trudeau-era multiculturalism.”

The institutionalization of multiculturalism through funding policies is a product of the official policy of Canadian multiculturalism, which accepts diversity and aims to encourage racial and ethnic harmony and cross-cultural understanding. The goal of this policy is inclusive integration through the discouraging of ghettoization, hatred, discrimination, and violence. However, the result has been the construction or reaffirmation of cultural borders as seen through the creation of “diversity slots” in mainstream theatre seasons, and federal and provincial granting systems that have led companies to fight over funding and audiences.

But Knowles suggests that certain tactics have been implemented to shift these borders, creating what he refers to as a heterotopic space of alternative ordering open to cultural exchange. Knowles offers a reading of multiculturalism that exposes its inner contradictions as it functions within Canadian governmental policy. In this way, he brings into focus the invisible borders that are being recognized and interrogated through intercultural theatre practice in Toronto.

Knowles’s discussion of intercultural theatre in Canada examines the concept of borders in relation to theatre practitioners who are recognized under the umbrella of Canada’s official multicultural policy. But the concept of borders acquires new meaning when discussed in relation to theatre practitioners living in Canada who are not considered part of the country’s multicultural mosaic. For these artists, borders are not invisible, and the possibility of shifting them—of functioning within a heterotopic space—is not feasible. The impermeability of certain borders becomes an especially important issue when speaking about these various modes of cultural theatre in relation to the possibility of cross-border cultural exchange. The reality of these impervious borders challenged my own perspectives on how to approach issues of cultural exchange within theatrical discourse.

Maki Yi’s performance *Gramma* is an autobiographical telling of the “journey of a displaced person in search of a home.” It explores the meaning of cultural memories within a geographical space divorced from its home

culture through the integration of Korean ritualistic performance and Western theatrical conventions. In Yi’s paper, “Towards an Auto-ethnography,” she reflected on creating her performance and addressed her position as an international student making theatre in Canada. As an auto-ethnographic project, Yi’s performance synthesizes a kind of postmodern ethnography. According to Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, just as “the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question,” so, too, has postmodern autobiography’s “notion of the coherent, individual self” (2). In this way, Yi’s performance examines her place on the periphery as an international student with a temporary visa. *Gramma* dramatizes the experience of living in a basement apartment and having to submit to

the rules and boundaries set out by her landlord, an elderly Korean woman. Although *Gramma* deals explicitly with the relationship between the student and the elderly woman and the

eventual bond that is created between them, it also depicts the loneliness and despair of someone confined to a space that is removed from a sense of home and belonging. For Yi, the concept of borders is very real and linked to exclusionary laws that inhibit the possibility of cultural exchange.

In a conversation I had with Yi following her performance, she revealed her personal circumstances. Having recently completed her Master’s degree at Simon Fraser University, her student visa was about to expire, which meant she would have to return to Korea. For me, this reality disclosed the ways in which the process of dissolving, shifting, or even crossing borders can be seen as a difficult if not impossible project. On one level, Yi’s performance spoke directly to intercultural practice, particularly in the successful integration of Korean ritual into a Westernized performance and the use of more than one language. On another level, however, *Gramma* challenged notions of hybridity through Yi’s auto-ethnographic approach, which drew attention to issues of cultural displacement, questions related to identity, and the fixedness of certain borders.

Rustom Bharucha, in *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*, points to the complexities of cultural exchange across political and cultural borders:

Intercultural decision-makers would like to believe that they function with a certain map of the world that counters the official maps and

borders. But one finds that even on these seemingly altruistic, humanitarian, border-free/border-less maps, the routes of cultural exchange have already been charted, the zones of interaction have already been fixed (30).

Unlike writers on intercultural practice who “almost” invoke the term interculturalism as a kind of “primordial state that has been arbitrarily disrupted by the ruptures of the nation-state,” Bharucha resists linking interculturalism with a “pre-existing beneficent state of being,” acknowledging how intercultural practice functions within institutionalized structures

Recognizing the difficulty of crossing borders while holding on to the belief of the possibility of a borderless global map also speaks directly to transcultural theatre practice.

where the possibility of shifting borders or re-routing the map becomes extremely remote (31). Recognizing the difficulty of crossing borders while holding on to the belief of the possibility of a borderless global map also speaks directly to transcultural theatre practice. Its goal to transcend cultures is related to a theoretical notion of dissolving borders; in practice, however, transculturalism often deals directly with the limitations imposed by borders.

Holly Lewis, co-collaborator with Toronto-based company Theatrefront, engaged these issues during the artistic panel. Theatrefront’s production *Return (The Sarajevo Project)* was a collaboration between Toronto and Sarajevo theatre artists. Theatrefront travelled to Bosnia to develop and rehearse the project. Lewis recognized her company’s transcultural or transnational goals that looked towards the universalities of human experience and the possibility of creating a universal theatrical language. But Lewis also questioned these goals and whether an attempt at universalizing is an appropriate approach to cultural exchange:

Our original plan was to talk, to knit together ... the intention of building a human identity was our goal. We thought that was going to happen. In the process of actually dealing with how you create, how these two different groups of people were creating theatre and how they communicate showed us that that [goal] was not as easily graspable as I thought it was.

(“Intercultural Performance in Toronto”). The ability to cross borders freely is a privilege bestowed on people who claim citizenship defined completely by economic and political borders, those who experience a world where borders can be permeable. In the face of global inequalities, however, heightened concerns about national security and increased border patrol mean that the experience of open borders is increasingly limited. It is this reality that problematizes transcultural practice in its attempt to transcend or erase borders.

Approaching the theoretical categories of inter-/intra-/multi- and trans-cultural theatre in relation to the practical challenges of physical and institutionally constructed borders enabled me to recognize in a more immediate manner both the distinctions among these terms and where these distinctions bleed into one another. Rather than being something to dissolve or erase, borders are something to be addressed, defined, and talked about in order to understand and appreciate the difference and diversity central to cultural exchange.

Yet what happens when these borders are not readily apparent, or have been erased before being acknowledged? I was faced with this question during the artistic panel, particularly in relation to intracultural practice and its correlative relationship with interculturalism. Yvette Nolan, artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, was asked to what degree she considered her “work to be intercultural” and whether “it talks across or knits together different communities?” In answer, she spoke to the concept of “Pan-Indianism” and what this concept means to Native Earth and the type of theatre they produce.

“Pan-Indianism” refers to the fact that Aboriginal peoples in Canada are a diverse group that is often portrayed as a homogeneous community. Native Earth’s theatrical practice lends itself to an intracultural reading in its expression of “corrupted or repressed” (5) traditions that reveal the origins and transformation of Native culture. But this “Pan-Indianism” is in fact *intercultural* in practice. Recognizing the difference within the Aboriginal theatre community in Toronto, Nolan acknowledged the way this difference forces practitioners to engage in a particular type of cultural exchange:

I’m working in Toronto with a group of Aboriginal people from all over this country. There’s Haida people here, and there’s Mi’qmaq and there’s Algonquins, and there’s lots of Mohawks, and lots of Crees and Ojibwas, but we’re not the same people and we all come from different cultural practices. So even within our so-called artistic community,



The lines that distinguish and allow difference to be recognized are crucial for understanding what these artists are saying. To dissolve these borders would undermine their efficacy.

our so-called community of artists, we are different.... We can't work in a language other than English because, even if we had our languages, which most of us don't, they would be all different. So we're working in the colonizers' language with the colonizers' words to tell a story about Aboriginal politics in this country right now. That's pretty intercultural. Within a larger culture, like within the dominant culture, there is this other thing happening that is us.

For me Nolan's reflection on Native Earth's intercultural practice complicated the voluntary nature of hybridization in such practice while addressing the question of "what constitutes a cultural group in theatre?" What struck me most was the relationship between an artistic community and a cultural group and where these categories intertwine. This relationship becomes increasingly problematic with regard to audience expectations and reception. A failure to recognize these borders within borders, so to speak, creates what Nolan

refers to as "an abyss between the perception of what we are going to say and what our artists are saying." In this way, the lines that distinguish and allow difference to be recognized are crucial for understanding what these artists are saying. To dissolve these borders would undermine their efficacy.

I believe that FOOT 2007: "Dissolving Borders" achieved its goal in creating a space wherein the topic of inter-/intra-/multi- and trans-cultural theatre practice could be explored. At the same time, it opened up the discourse for the ongoing inquiry into how to talk about these issues and how to establish a dialogue between theatre scholars and practitioners. The experience challenged my personal expectations and my approach to issues of cultural exchange in theatre. When deciding on a title for the festival, the notion of dissolving borders seemed appropriate, as it spoke both to the goals of the festival and my own perception of what cultural exchange in theatre attempts to do; by the end of the three days, however, my perspective had shifted. What I took away from the papers, panel, performances, and discussions was the realization that to aim to dissolve borders is perhaps a disservice to the discourse of cultural exchange in theatre. What is important in this discourse is to recognize these borders, explore why they exist, and acknowledge the differences as well as the similarities across them, whether they are physical barriers or imaginary constructs.

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## BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Marcela A. Fuentes

A country at war, a twenty-first-century war at home and abroad that polices, wounds, presses, and constrains the body through neoconservative policies, racial profiling, and corporate violence. I cannot imagine an artist better suited to respond to the current situation in the US than Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In his work, Gómez-Peña, a Chicano performance artist based in California since 1978, identifies the body as the main battlefield on which dominant authority constructs its feared and desired Other. And the Other, Gómez-Peña insists, talks back.

GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA  
*ethno-techno: Writings on Performance, Activism, and Pedagogy*.  
Ed. Elaine Peña. New York and London:  
Routledge, 2005. Pp. xxvi + 304.  
Illustrations 42.



*ethno-techno*, Gómez-Peña's seventh book, edited by fellow artist and critical thinker Elaine Peña, presents the work of this prolific artist with his collaborators of the international performance troupe La Pocha Nostra in a broad range of formats: open letters, dialogues, scripts, essays, pedagogical guidelines, cyber-*communiqués*, and visual documentation. For Gómez-Peña, the underlying charge that weaves all the pieces together is the need for an urgent intervention in the current sociopolitical scenario. The book offers tactics and methodologies for artists and intellectuals to confront a system ruled by oppressive politics, corporatized world-making, and global violence.

The title—*ethno-techno*—situates the two ends of Gómez-Peña's work: on one, the recycling and re-examination of the ethnographic practices that fetishize the foreign in a post-colonial world, and on the other, the mocking of the technological craze, refashioned from the low-tech perspective of an outcast. *ethno-techno* also marks the maturity of Gómez-Peña as a cultural worker who *masters*—or, better, who *guesses, risks, and* many times *fails*, then *tries out* again—the craft through which to approach, expose, and intervene in the contested space of the multicultural landscape. *ethno-techno* is a book about serious matters, the challenges faced by artists and nonwhites in the current state of exception, which Gómez-Peña approaches with strategic wit and cynical humor, from a perspective brought about through praxis and political imagination.

The book is structured in five sections presented as “tracks,” a format in tune with the totality of the project. The different tracks make it possible for readers to jump from one section to another in a nonlinear way, a sort of “party shuffling” that responds to the particular interest or needs of the reader, be this teaching a performance class or participating in a protest event. The tracks or sections pinpoint the broad range of Gómez-Peña's interventions, simultaneously mapping out the areas that are crucial for a multilayered thinking about performance and politics.

Track One—“Introductory essays and chronicles”—brings together four texts written between 1999 and 2004 that situate Gómez-Peña's work as a border artist who, like many other “postnational Mexicans,” has had to confront “defensive nationalisms” (7) both in their homeland and in the US. An integral part of Gómez-Peña's border-crossings as an interdisciplinary intellectual is chronicled in the essay “In defense

of performance.” This is one of the few existing texts in which a performance artist breaks down this artistic practice into its many constitutive elements: the body; the relationship with the audience; the unavoidable risks; the dialogue between theatre and performance as two distinct fields with their own challenges and possibilities; the demand for the “new;” and the troubled dependency on art-institutions. In this track, one of the best texts in the entire volume, “*Culturas-in-extremis*,” engages the challenges

that radical performers face within what Gómez-Peña terms the culture of “the mainstream bizarre.” This is the media appropriation of the gestures that performance artists use to make a political point, but which, when appropriated, are deprived of any thinking about ethics. Within this context, performance artists are pressured over how to make their art meaningful.

Gómez-Peña's tactic has been to mimic the mainstream practices of representation that cater to the white consumers' desires. But the problem remains: Gómez-Peña is not certain that it is clear for the audience that his work is a step removed from the process that he is trying to denounce. What if the audience is not able to recognize the difference between *being and/or stating* and *parodying* or between *reproducing* and *criticizing*? Gómez-Peña asks, “If our new audiences are more interested in direct simulation than in content, can we effectively camouflage content as experience?” (52) This shift of the radical into media spectacle within a culture that frames ethics as *passé* and revolution as *style* constitutes one of the toughest challenges for Gómez-Peña to deal with, not only in a performance art frame but also in the field of pedagogy, a subject that he addresses in the next track.

Track Two—“Pedagogy, A useful guide to the Pocha method”—provides an in-depth description of the kind of performance work and political praxis that Gómez-Peña and his associates of La Pocha Nostra are dedicated to, including one of their main projects today: pedagogy as a channel to open utopian spaces and the classroom as a performance site in itself. This section—produced in collaboration with members of La Pocha Nostra, especially Rachel Rogers—offers the performance exercises that Gómez-Peña and his collaborators share with students and artists in their workshops. Taking “performance as an effective catalyst for thought and debate” (79), Gómez-Peña states that in the workshops “the basic premise [...] is founded on the ideal [that] ‘if

we learn to cross borders on stage, we may learn how to do so in larger social spheres” (79). In Gómez-Peña's work, the politics of crossing boundaries is then materialized in an aesthetics of the hybrid and the hyphenated, giving birth to creatures such as “ethno-cyborgs,” the multilayered personae that are built following the audience's projection of myths and stereotypes that inform their everyday relationship with the constructed Other. La Pocha Nostra's work, based on the heightened display of bodies available for continual re-invention and intervention, cites exhibition technologies such as the portrait, the *tableau vivant*, and the colonial dioramas that create a taxonomy of the individual and the macro-social as they are conceived in this troubled cultural exchange.

Track Three reproduces radio commentaries, which are another performance site for Gómez-Peña's public interventions. This section presents the written as it is spoken, transforming the reader into a virtual listener. Pieces presented as post-cards or letters exist beside personal accounts of situations in which the state interpolates Gómez-Peña, casting him as a suspect or as a second-class citizen. The highlight of this section is one of the artist's trademarks, an exercise of political imagination that reports the effects of a “Trans-American Free-Trade Zone”: “Hong Kong has relocated to Baja California to establish the powerful Baja-Kong [...] The twin cities of San Diego and ‘Tiawana’ (a prior merge of Tijuana and Taiwan) have united to form The Mac/quiladora Republic of San Diejuana [...]” (148-9).

Track Four offers performance texts for the stage and the Internet, which has become a new medium for Gómez-Peña's *communiqués*. In these pieces, the word is the predominant element, in contrast to Gómez-Peña's photo and performance work. In the latter, he uses images as the core factor from which to originate meaning, and articulated speech appears only in the shape of a framing title. Thematically, the section moves from a Chicano vs. Monolingual Anglo-Saxon zone of conflict to the new scenario of US homeland security and its “most wanted inner demon” (221). The sequence shows how old (racial) conflicts are now reframed and legitimized under the logic of the “war on terror”: The “Allatolla Whatever” then joins the classic “Mad Mex” to denounce “cultural misunderstanding [as] America's favorite sport” (223). In order to address the issues that need urgent attention in the new scenario summarized by the command, “If you see something, say

something,” the last texts of this section reproduce Gómez-Peña's traditional political performance genres: a sequence of profiles portraying the new targets (as in the “WANTED” billboard); a declaration, very much in the style of Subcomandante Marcos' *communiqués*; a list of performance tips for marginalized individuals to avoid xenophobia when appearing in airports, and, most importantly, “to express solidarity with innocent Arab-Americans and Arab-looking people” (236); and an itemized statement of the “rights and privileges” of a US citizen post-9/11, in which Gómez-Peña's uncovers the traps of “freedom” through a cynical impersonation of his Other: white Americans.

The closing section, Track Five—“Conversations with theorists”—enacts the dialogical interview mode, in which questions and comments come from both the interviewer and the interviewee. The first dialogue, with Colombian-born philosopher Eduardo Mendieta, returns to Gómez-Peña's and La Pocha Nostra's tactic of “reverse anthropology,” defined here as

What if the audience is not able to recognize the difference between being and/or stating and parodying or between reproducing and criticizing?

the inversion by which those who are placed by dominant culture in the margins “occupy a fictional central space, fully knowing that it's fictional, and [...] speak

always from this fictional center, to push the dominant culture to the margins, treat it as exotic and unfamiliar” (246). There is also a return to the issue of the role of artists under the conditions of “the mainstream bizarre” and how Gómez-Peña's use of the marked body problematizes the lack of ethics that pervades media, pop culture, and the tourist industry. The two dialogues with Lisa Wolford deal with the dangers and pleasures of collaboration and the challenges faced by artists in the dystopic context of post-World Trade Center attacks. The last dialogue, with editor Elaine Peña, opens up to public view the background history of the production of the book and situates author and editor as peers engaged in an intellectual endeavor in which they shared equal border-crossing difficulties.

*ethno-techno* is an extremely generous and important book, both a report from the scene of the troubled “post” scenario—post-civil rights movement, post-culture wars, post-witnessing the event of 9/11—and a compilation of the tactics that were built in the many years of high and low intensity conflict traversed by an artist of color in the many crossroads of art, culture, and society. The book is of interest not only to those living in the US, but to artists and critical thinkers concerned with producing work in a context that is sensitive to cultural differences. As Gómez-

Peña travels south more regularly and engages in artistic collaboration with cultural producers from developing countries, we can expect the next book to include more reports on these dialogues and on how Gómez-Peña's work opens up zones of exchange for cultural artists to think about local labels and disputed identities and about how performance can serve as a tool to reclaim sovereignty and agency in a post-colonial scenario.




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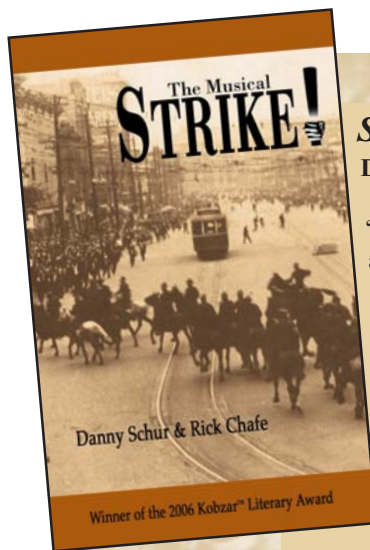
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