

alt.theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

VOL. 7, NO. 1 SEPTEMBER 2009 \$5.00





Teesri Duniya Theatre's 29th season

TRUTH AND TREASON

The season opened with the world premiere of *Truth and Treason* by Rahul Varma and directed by Arianna Bardesono -it is a fearlessly told story exploring war on terror as well as terror itself. The play has been developed at the Factory Theatre (Toronto) and in India under the guidance of legendary director the late Dr. Habib Tanvir. It was presented from September 9-19 2009 at the Monument National. To continue the dialogue, please join Rahul's Forum www.teesriduniya.com/rahulsforum.



LA BHO PAL BHO PAL

A public reading of *Bhopal* was held at the Café l'Exode for the Forum social québécois (FSQ) on October 10th 2009, lead by director Arianna Bardesono. *Bhopal*, by Rahul Varma, deals with one of the most tragic industrial accidents of all time, the leak from a Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal, India that poisoned hundreds of thousands of people in December 1984. Originally produced in 2003, the play was translated in french by Paul Lefebvre, co-produced with Théâtre Sortie de Secours and performed in Montreal and Quebec city in 2005-2006.



UNTOLD HISTORIES

Untold Histories is a community engaged cultural project based on stories of genocide, displacement, and human rights violations as well as narratives of survival. This season's focus is on stories from the Armenian, Iranian and south-asian communities. For more details of public presentations at the upcoming CURA conference, November 5-8, 2009 in Montreal, visit www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/



THE LAST 15 SECONDS

A Montreal premiere of the collective creative team directed by Maïdi Bou-Matar of The MT Space (Multicultural Theatre Space), *The Last 15 Seconds* begins with the tragic death of Syrian-American filmmaker Mustapha Akkad and his daughter Rima during a series of co-coordinated attacks that hit three prominent hotels in Jordan in 2005. The work constructs an imagined physical and verbal dialogue between Mustapha Akkad and Rawad Jassem Mohammad Abed, the suicide bomber who carried out the explosion that killed Akkad. The play opens May 2010



FIREWORKS

In November 2009 and March 2010, we will present a new plays-in-development reading series, which will feature playwrights and plays that support cultural diversity in Canadian theatre.



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- New and alternative directions in theatre and dramaturgy;
- Profiles of artists, companies, current practices, and influences;
- Critical reviews of books, plays, and productions;
- Comparative analyses of national and international approaches to cultural diversity and the arts.

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alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage
 is published quarterly by



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COVER PHOTO
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Naila Keleta Mae "this is my rant"

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alt.theatre:cultural diversity and the stage is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage. Our readership includes theatre practitioners, academics, plus others interested in issues pertaining to arts and cultural diversity.

alt.theatre welcomes suggestions or proposals for interviews, news, pieces of self-reflection, analytical articles, and reviews of books, plays, and performances.

Founded in 1998, *alt.theatre* is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre—an intercultural theatre company with a mandate to produce socially engaged theatre that reflects Canada's social and cultural diversity. *alt.theatre* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography.

Bibliothèque Nationale du Québec / National Library of Canada ISSN 1481-0506

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts which last year invested \$20.1 million in writing and publishing throughout Canada.



We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Magazine Fund toward our editorial and production costs.





SPIN

by Edward Little

As the fictional author of a book on spin explains in John Mighton's play *Body and Soul*:

To lie, you have to know your facts are wrong. But when you make things up—who knows, you could be right. Some scientists at Harvard recently asked people who had no background in economics to predict movements in the Japanese stock market, and they were right 98% of the time! (Sc 6: 27)

While Canada's Fraser Institute is not renowned for supporting the arts, it appears that they do support—in principle if not in practice—the creative approach to truth espoused by Mighton's character. Recently, the Institute weighed in on the health care debate raging in the United States. Seeking to debunk claims that a public option would reduce the number of personal bankruptcies resulting from inadequate health insurance, Senior Policy Analyst Mark Rovere and Director of Bio-Pharma and Health Policy Research Brett Skinner authored a report claiming that personal bankruptcy rates in Canada are marginally higher than in the United States (Skinner).

Who knows, they could be right?

The problem, according to independent policy analyst Donald Gutstein, is that the Fraser Institute drew *exclusively* on 2006-2007 statistics—a year in which US bankruptcy rates plummeted as a direct result of legislation that made it more difficult for American consumers to declare bankruptcy. Gutstein charges the Fraser Institute with using spin to further their own anti-health care reform agenda by selecting *not* to include statistics from the six years prior to 2006—data that pegged US bankruptcy rates at almost 75% higher than those in Canada—*nor* data from 2008 that showed US bankruptcies once again exceeding Canadian rates.

Clearly, Mighton and the Fraser Institute are not the only Canadians using math in creative ways. Novelist Yann Martel's approach also warrants consideration. In 2007, Martel calculated that the Canadian government's 2008 appropriation to the Canada Council for the Arts would amount to a paltry \$5.50 per Canadian. In response to this paucity, Martel decided to send Stephen Harper one new book every two weeks. Martel selects works known to expand the essential "stillness" that appreciating a work of art requires. He includes a personal letter to the PM with each book and keeps track of the PM's replies.

Martel's strategy has had limited success. The Council's appropriation hovers at 2008 levels. Mr. Harper has yet to reply directly to Martel, and the most recent correspondence from the office of the PM—a mere three lines reported with book 55 in

May 2009—acknowledges the gift, thanks Martel for sharing his views, assures him that his "comments have been carefully noted," and directs him to the PM's website "for more information on the Government's initiatives."

To put arts funding in perspective. Ottawa-based economist Ryan Campbell cites a University of Quebec in Montreal study reporting that, "between 1993 and 2003, the Big Five Canadian Banks used their offshore affiliates to avoid paying \$16 billion in Canadian taxes" (6). And this is before their *really good* years leading up to the global financial collapse—small wonder that our banks are held up as the envy of the G-8. That is an average of \$8,606 per Canadian per year in unpaid taxes—money that has *not* gone to poverty reduction, health care, employment assistance, job creation, education, reducing social inequality, *or* the arts.

This is the tip of the Canadian iceberg. According to Ryan Campbell, Canadian corporations have "over 1,200 affiliates in tax haven regions." Recently, a US tax investigation implicated the UBS Bank in Switzerland in assisting wealthy Canadians to move \$5.6 billion offshore out of reach of the Canadian taxman (1). Globally, Campbell claims that "the world's wealthiest individuals have now parked an estimated \$11,500 billion offshore, enabling them to dodge over \$250 billion in taxes each year," and Corporations have been "stowing from \$700 billion to \$1,000 billion in tax havens every year" (1). Then, there is the \$200 billion allocated to Canadian banks through the "Extraordinary Financing Framework" in the January 2009 Federal budget. Even independent progressive conservative Senator Elaine McCoy characterizes this as "Bay Street's bailout." McCoy notes that this is "by far the single largest item in Mr. Flaherty's economic action plan," and compares the sum to the mere \$4 billion allocated to retrain workers.

Meanwhile, at the *Toronto Star*, in response to a fellow blogger, a cranky correspondent takes issue with the characterization of the \$200 billion as a *bailout*: "For an MBA guy, you really don't have any idea about finance. First, unlike USA, Canada has not provided any *bailouts*. The government did an *asset swap* of cash for high quality, CMHC insured mortgages to *inject liquidity*" (Credit, my emphasis).

As of the last quarter, Canadian Banks were once again posting profits. Meanwhile, Employment Insurance has been gutted to the point where only 40% of Canadian men and 30% of Canadian women are eligible for benefits—down from 80% in the previous recession (Bruce Campbell 32), and no one is reporting the direct cost to Canadian taxpayers of financing the \$200 billion.

Instead we get spin, misinformation, disinformation, smoke, and mirrors. Bush waged a “War on Terror,” Canadians established a “mission in Afghanistan.” President Obama is rumoured to be a “secret Muslim” as he takes on health insurance corporations and Big Pharma, just as President Roosevelt was branded a “secret Jew” for promoting economic reform with Social Security legislation and the “New Deal” in his time. In response to reasoned argument for universal health care, opponents of Obama strike chords of fear with emotion-laden sound bites evoking “death panels,” “socialized medicine,” and a “government takeover.”

The Canadian government tells us that we have the “best financial system in the world.” Yet according to IMF data, Canada—behind only the US and Britain—has “incurred the third-highest financial stabilization costs in the G-7.” Canada’s slight-of-hand “non-budgetary,” “off-book” borrowing appears as *debt* on the books of the Bank of Canada and CMHC—remember the \$200 billion?—but is *not* reported as part of the official Government *deficit* (Bruce Campbell 33).

A guest on CBC Radio’s *The Current*—apparently caught up in the language of spin while discussing a laudable “re-adaptive use” of a closed steel plant to recycle kitchen and other organic waste—refers to fertilizer as a “soil amendment product.” “Crap!” I hear my father say.

As the American clash over health care demonstrates, spin is a powerful weapon in the battle of conservative private interests against the progressive public good. For George Lakoff, distinguished professor of cognitive sciences and linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, the battleground is all in the mind—specifically in the minds of the millions of Americans who possess *both* conservative and progressive worldviews on different issues (social progressives and financial conservatives, for example). According to Lakoff, the human brain uses a neurological property called “mutual inhibition” to shift between contradictory worldviews without the complications of moral compunction. Lakoff claims that the progressive cause is losing the battle for a public option precisely because they are depending on the reasoned argument of “Policy Speak”—an approach based on antiquated faith in logic and objective discourse and the false assumption that people “all think the same way.” The expectation is that moral persons, when presented with a reasoned argument, will make the *right* decision. Conservatives are relying on marketing strategies informed by cognitive and neuroscience to evoke a conservative worldview through vivid metaphorical comparisons that induce people to make a decision for the *Right*.

Lakoff stresses that “most reason is unconscious” and is dependant on emotional appeal. “Words,” according to Lakoff, “activate frame-and-metaphor circuits, which in turn activate world-view circuits. Whenever brain circuitry is activated, the synapses get stronger and the circuits are easier to activate again.” Conservative language activates conservative frames, which in turn activate and strengthen conservative worldviews. Progressive attempts that repeat emotionally charged conservative language in order to debunk it usually fail precisely because they trigger and reinforce the neuro pathways to already-established conservative worldviews. Lakoff’s first rule of effective communication is to state the positive in your own terms and *not* to quote the other side’s language with a negation. Lakoff’s classic example of how conservatives learned this the hard way? Nixon’s repetition of “I am not a crook.”

Canadian opinion writer Rex Murphy seems to have a pretty firm grasp of Lakoff’s science. In his criticism of Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children*, Murphy camouflages the conservative firepower of his emotionally laden language with the appearance of reasoned argument. Churchill wrote this ten-minute play in January 2009 as a response to Israel’s attacks on Gaza. She offers the play free of charge for anyone who wants to produce it, providing that there is no admission fee and that a collection is taken for Medical Aid for Palestinians. Montreal’s Independent Jewish Voices and Teesri Duniya Theatre co-presented the play in May 2009.

Murphy titles his piece “A Distasteful Display of Agitprop.” His emotionally-charged twenty-six-word byline crams in a descriptive “one-sided playlet” and a judgmental “the kind of vile attack on a people that only Israelis could suffer”—oh how Rex must have resented expending the remaining eleven words of his opening sally on those pesky articles, conjunctions, prepositions, and subject-defining nouns that contribute nothing to a conservative worldview, and yet are indispensable to the appearance of intelligible communication. Murphy characterizes Churchill’s play as “nasty, brutish and short” (with a nod to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*), “deplorable,” “a bibulous outpouring,” a “vicious imagining,” and a “raging rant.” The crux of Murphy’s “reasoned argument” is that *the play* is “unbalanced.” Rex is described as “Canada’s most opinionated man” on the hardcover edition of his most recent book, *Canada and other Matters of Opinion*.

Playwright Mark Ravenhill responds to criticisms that Churchill’s play is not balanced with, “So What? . . . Art isn’t fair. It’s not neutral. . . . Picasso didn’t paint Guernica because he saw there was good and bad on both sides of the Spanish civil war. . . . Dickens didn’t have a balanced

view of the Victorian Poor Laws.” The central character in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* protests the contaminated water supply. The playwright “doesn’t give room for the argument that privatized utilities serving the interests of shareholders can also be a good thing.”

And so, via Murphy and Ravenhill back to the Harper government’s worldview of art—characterized by Martel as “mere entertainment to be indulged in after the serious business of life.” A worldview espousing a bare-bones arts funding philosophically in line with an approach to education that focuses on teaching employment skills rather than the creation of thinking citizens. A worldview designed “to engineer souls that are post-historical, post-literate and pre-robotic . . . blank souls wired to be unfulfilled and susceptible to conformism at its worst—intolerance and totalitarianism . . . incapable of thinking for themselves and vowed to a life of frustrated serfdom at the service of the feudal lords of profit” (Martel).

Clearly, a worldview to be challenged.

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All White *All Right?*

*Vancouver Theatre Artists Talk about Vancouver's
Monochrome Stages*

In February 2009, actor-producer David C. Jones sent a letter to my Website, www.vancouverplays.com, commenting on what he perceived as a troubling absence of non-white faces on Vancouver's stages. Vancouverplays provides news, previews, and reviews of theatre and dance in the city and surrounding areas, and the Letters to the Editor page offers a forum for exchanges of views on artistic and other issues—a forum that in the Website's five years of existence has rarely generated much action. This time was different. David's letter set off a flurry of responses from Vancouver theatre artists over the next two months: actors, directors, artistic directors. I received more than a dozen letters and the conversation carried over into another Vancouver theatre blog, The Plank (<http://plankmagazine.com>), which published five more.

All the letters agree that this lack of diversity in casting is a problem and most agree it's absurd that this should be so in a city so intensely polycultural. A recent study by sociologist Reginald Bibby found that fully 76 percent of Vancouver teenagers are foreign-born or have immigrant parents, and they "have more interracial friendships than young people in any major city in the country" (Todd A1). Yet those demographics are not at all reflected on Vancouver's stages—and not just because few teenagers go to plays. This has been a problem here as long as anyone can remember. Back in 1990, Mark Leiren-Young observed Vancouver's rapidly changing ethnic mix, due especially to increased Chinese immigration after Expo '86, but noted that he'd hardly ever seen an Asian face in a Vancouver theatrical production. He concluded presciently, "Unfortunately, it looks like it'll be some time before that mix is truly represented on stage" (Leiren-Young 21). *Plus ça change...*

This summer the diversity issue has been overshadowed by death and the politics of arts funding. The premature loss of playwright/actor Lorena Gale from cancer and the awful death of teenager Azra Young, daughter of Electric Company theatre artists Kim Collier and Jonathon Young, along with her two cousins in a fire have cast a pall over our community. At the same time announcements of cutbacks and mysterious freezes to provincial arts grants threaten seasons already planned and budgeted—and the very existence of some companies. Yet the diversity issue remains a dull ache if not a sharp pain.

I present the following dozen letters in the order in which I received them. They have been slightly trimmed and edited, but nothing of substance has been changed. To see the originals and two additional letters by David C. Jones and Paulo Ribeiro, go to <http://www.vancouverplays.com/letters.shtml>.

Jerry Wasserman

"Arts Mirror Reflection False"

Dear Jerry,

I saw a show last night (*Whale Riding Weather*), and although I enjoyed it I was troubled. Today as I was walking down the street I saw a sea of faces and then it hit me—this was the sixth show I'd seen in four weeks that had an all-white cast, and it is really starting to bug me.

A quick look through the theatre directory on the Web shows that this exclusive trend is rampant. One can argue that if it is a period piece like *The Constant Wife* at the Stanley Theatre, you have to cast all white because of the time period (although I don't agree with that). But look at all the shows that are playing or have just closed: *Last Five Years* and *There Came a Gypsy Riding* at Jericho Arts Centre—all white; *Three Viewings* at Presentation House—all white; *Skydive* at the Arts Club—all white; *Holy Mo* at Pacific Theatre—all white; *Toronto, Mississippi* at the Playhouse—all white; *Dial M for Murder* at Metro Theatre—all white; *Opening Night* at Vagabond Players—all white; *Art of Murder* at the Gateway—all white.

Of the shows that are on now, I found only three—*Altar Boyz* (the Arts Club on tour), *Basic Training* at the Cultch, *Lives Were around Me* at Battery Opera—in which you see a non-white face. If one of the jobs of theatre is to hold a mirror up to society, then I don't know what society they are reflecting, because it is not like any I have seen anywhere in Greater Vancouver.

And to be clear, I am not saying that local theatres should be doing Chinese or Black plays about the Chinese or Black "experience." It would just be nice to see some Chinese or Black faces on the local stages more regularly. Otherwise, the theatre is going to become more and more unreal and exclusive and reflective of a society that doesn't exist anywhere in this city except on stage.

David C. Jones



David C. Jones

nic for the role. However, I have seen several non-ethnic white men cast as Spanish or other "ethnic" parts repeatedly. Surprisingly, I haven't experienced this problem working in TV or film, where I've played a variety of roles from Irish to Italian to Argentine.

As someone who grew up in Vancouver, I had never been in such a homogeneous group of peers until I started working in the theatre. A few years ago I gathered a group of high school friends to watch a play I really loved. My diverse group of friends enjoyed the show but more than one remarked that they were the only non-white people in the audience that night. They didn't feel comfortable hanging around after, so we left.

Since then, at concerts or sports events, I realize that I never encounter such lack of diversity as I do when I go to the theatre. I'm not suggesting that people in the theatre community are racist. Far from it. But it seems strange that in a city as diverse as ours there is so little variety on stage. It's a missed opportunity. There are so many wonderful stories waiting to be told.

The theatre needs the support of the community. Reflecting the community that supports it seems like the right thing to do. It probably wouldn't hurt to reach out to new audience members also. We could always use more bums in seats.

Paulo Reis Ribeiro



Paulo Reis Ribeiro

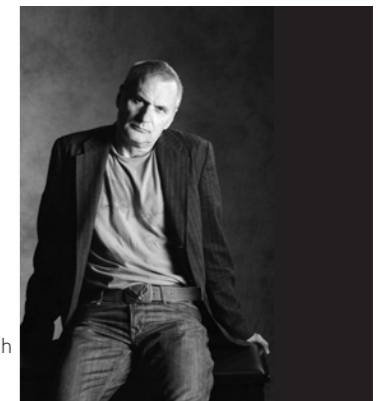
Dear Jerry,

I was relieved to see David C. Jones share a concern I've had for some time. Vancouver's stages do not reflect the diversity in the greater community.

I've witnessed a racial double standard in my own acting career. I am of Portuguese descent and have an "ethnic" look. I have been told when auditioning for more than one period piece that I looked too eth-

"A Change is Gonna Come—Or Is It?"

Morris Panych



Dear Jerry,

David Jones comments in his letter about casting more visible minorities, saying it would be nice to see different faces on our stages. More than that, I think it's essential. I would go out on a limb here and say that most people I know, in management or artistic positions, also agree that it is necessary. So why doesn't it happen?

I will tell you from my perspective as director (and I could also say as writer), I love the idea of diverse casting. And yet I don't do that much of it. Why? I will use the example of *The Constant Wife*, my most recent opportunity to cast anyone in Vancouver. Because I am not in town very much, all of this casting was done through discussions with the management of the Arts Club, via emails and phone. I started by putting forward the names of people I thought would be good in certain parts. The Arts Club responded by putting forward their own list. Mostly, they liked my list, which was based on my knowledge of who I knew, either by reputation or my experience working with them. Unfortunately, in this case, I couldn't get out to audition for it, so the remainder of the casting [...] was done through a kind of delicate negotiation, whereby the Arts Club would submit names and resumes to me, I would look them over, pull the ones I thought were suitable, and these we would discuss. At the same time I would call people I knew in Vancouver, people who had likely seen the candidates, and ask them about this or that actor, what they were like to work with, how reliable they were, what they were like with this kind of material, etc.

In this whole process not a single person of colour came to my mind, or anybody else's. Why? Why doesn't my mind go there? Am I that unimaginative? I must accept that I have certain prejudices, clearly. As for the Arts Club, they didn't submit anybody of colour to me as a candidate either. So in part I think the Arts Club must accept they have a certain prejudice also. This prejudice, I want to assure you, is not out of active dislike or distaste for anyone, but out of habit. I am not in the habit of thinking of a black woman, for instance, for the part of a Maugham character, the wife of an established doctor, in a play set in London in 1928. I suspect the Arts Club is not in this habit either. I further suspect that there are many actors of colour who are also not in the habit of thinking this way. Nobody ever said to anybody, to my recollection, "Please, whatever happens, no people of colour in this play." Instead, it is a kind of prejudice, maybe the worst kind: innocuous, bland, generic.

Only the most imaginative person would see a Chinese actor playing the part of the very British mother, for instance, of a proper English girl. I wish that imaginative person were me. But I admit my mind doesn't automatically go there. I consider myself a creative and intelligent person and I have been known to think "outside the box," but to this day, I readily admit, I tend to respond out of habit to certain kinds of casting. I'd like to break this habit; I'd like to think of more nontraditional ways of casting. When I think about *The Constant Wife*, aside from my desire to put the very best possible people on stage, I can't think of a single good reason not to have had more diverse casting.

Does it mean I will do more colour-blind casting in the future? Yes and no. I have a great desire to redress the imbalance between actors on stage and the audience. At the moment we are only talking potential audience. The great majority of the Arts Club audience is white; at least it has been for *The Constant Wife*. I suspect this is because of the subject matter, the author, any number of things, but also because of the habit of white people going to the theatre more than, say, East Indians. So if you talk about what is actually true, in fact, and perhaps sadly, the casting of *The Constant Wife* very much reflects its audience.

This can change; this change is not going to come because suddenly more and more diverse audiences will appear. This change will happen because somebody leads and others follow. The leadership can come from people of colour pushing for more diverse casting, it can come from audiences demanding it, it can come from directors casting in more diverse ways, it can come from management insisting that people of colour be considered in non-traditional roles, it can come from acting schools enrolling a more diverse cross-section of students, it can come from critics asking for diversity, and it can come from letters to editors such as this one by David Jones.

I don't want to defend myself, really. I am to blame for my own shortcomings, one of them my complete lack of imagination in nontraditional casting. I'm not going to say that there aren't enough good actors of colour to fill these roles; the truth is, I don't know if there are or not until I see them. I think theatres need to do a better job of pushing the colour-blind casting agenda. I think directors need to open their minds more. I think actors of colour need to see themselves in more nontraditional roles and ask to be seen for them. I think acting schools should make their enrolments as diverse as possible. If all these things happen, we will see more diverse casting on our stages.

If our theatre is to be relevant to a broader audience, we must all open our minds. Ten years from now, a production of *The Constant Wife* at the Stanley Theatre could not only have a more racially diverse cast, but an equally diverse audience watching it. It's up to all of us.

Morris Panych



Annabel Kershaw

"Canadian Theatre: The Last Bastion of Mono-Ethnicity"

Dear Jerry,

I want everyone to know that Canadian Actors' Equity is taking a serious look at the diversity issue on a national level. This initiative was spearheaded by members of the Vancouver Advisory, including David C. Jones and Valerie Sing Turner. At their urging, National Council has taken this up as a priority and we have spent a huge amount of time working to come up with policy which will address the very real desire to effect change in this area. There is no question that the make-up of contemporary society is by no means reflected on our stages and I believe that the health of our profession depends on a change in casting practices. I have just finished three days of meetings where the equivalent of a full day was given over to identifying ways we as an association can help to facilitate this change.

On a personal note, I often feel as though theatre is the last bastion of mono-ethnicity (someone today said "Dead White Theatre"). If there were any other profession, particularly one as public as ours, where so few visible minorities were employed, there would be an absolute outcry. I can't even think of other disciplines within the entertainment industry with so little diversity. Dance, music, opera, film, and television all broke through these barriers years ago.

The subject is a thorny one to be sure, and even as I write this I'm wondering who I will offend and whether my terminology will get reactions. I know we're all diverse. I know that, statistically, visible minorities aren't anymore; they're a majority. But at some point you just have to put it out there and hope that it makes sense and that more people will embrace the change that needs to come. Our world will be richer for it and in the end one can hope it will make theatre a growth industry instead of one struggling to survive.

Annabel Kershaw



Valerie Sing Turner

"Whose Tradition Is It, Anyway?"

Dear Jerry,

As an artist of colour in the Vancouver theatre scene, I'd like to throw out a few thoughts on this important issue. First of all, I'd like everyone to consider throwing away labels such as "colour-blind" and "nontraditional" casting. When I'm on stage, there's no way for me to pretend I'm white, even when I play a character that might originally have been written with a white actor in mind. Nor would I want to pretend; my ethnicity adds uniqueness, more layers of complexity and a heretofore unmined richness to an already well-known story—if the director has the imagination to see those possibilities. And to think that an audience is "blind" to colour is ludicrous and disingenuous at the same time. As for the term "nontraditional," there's a negative implication that to cast diverse actors goes against tradition. But one must ask: exactly whose tradition is that? Asian and other non-white societies have long traditions of casting non-white actors in plays written by Western European and North American writers, and they don't think it strange at all to have, say, a Chinese Hamlet or a South

Asian Nora. Only in Canada, it seems, do we have a tradition of persistently creating an oddly unreal world populated only by white people. So in discussions regarding (lack of) diversity, my vote is for "contemporary casting," which has the positive connotation of reflecting contemporary society and therefore making the work relevant to contemporary society.

Like David, I don't believe it is most people's intention to be exclusive; it's just that very few people make much of an effort to be *inclusive*. At a time when theatre's traditional audience of predominantly white upper and middle class patrons is greying and urgently needs to be replaced, the lack of recognition of the need to make Canadian theatre relevant to a younger, more diverse audience is unfortunate. Statistics Canada has forecast that by 2017—only eight years from now!—the so-called visible minority will be the visible *majority*, particularly in Canada's urban centres. It is ironic that in a city like Vancouver whose glorious diversity is a fact of our everyday lives, such reality remains invisible, rather than visible, on the stage.

I think about this issue a lot. I have to. People make judgments about me—good and bad—just by looking at my face. So at another recent discussion about diversity, with Canadian Actors' Equity Council, I had something of an epiphany: I would venture to say that 95 percent of what passes for "Canadian" theatre is actually *white identity* theatre. We all know what identity theatre is. If a production has a black playwright with a black director and a predominantly black cast, it's black identity theatre. Same idea whether it's Asian, Aboriginal, South Asian, you name it. So if there's a white playwright, a white director, and a predominantly (or exclusively) white cast, then it's white identity theatre. (And probably 80 percent of that is white *male* identity theatre, but that's a whole other discussion.) That's okay: there's a place for white identity theatre just as there is for black/Asian/Aboriginal/South Asian/everything-else identity theatre in the theatrical ecology, because all those stories need to be told. But please, just put a sign on your door, in your mandate and grant proposals, and have the courage to declare that that's the kind of theatre you're interested in doing. Please don't pretend you're producing *Canadian* theatre.

And please don't suggest that there isn't enough talent among the visible minority; that is a specious and

insulting argument. I know many talented actors of colour who toil away in undeserved obscurity. As one young black actor said to me, "My parents warned me that I would have to be ten times as good as a white actor just to get noticed." Case in point: at the tribute to Lorena Gale at the Firehall on Monday night I was thrilled by the number of talented artists of colour onstage as well as the incredible diversity of the nearly full house. The talent is out there; it's just that few people are willing to look. And in a world where white and interracial couples adopt children from Asia and Africa, there are absolutely no limitations as to who can play what—except in our imaginations.

So the real question isn't why is there not enough diversity on Canadian stages. The real question is *why do we produce theatre?* What is theatre's *raison d'être* for present-day Canadians? Is it merely to entertain? To provide a pleasant distraction? To provide an alternative for consumer dollars? As an idealist, I believe that at its best theatre can resonate with its audiences in both small and profound ways that provoke change for the better in individuals and society. So what message are we conveying to our audiences when we exclude nearly 50 percent of our society from the stage? How can we open people's minds to other possibilities if the world we present doesn't reflect their own? And who are we *not* reaching? What limitations are we unwittingly imposing on ourselves if we fail to make ourselves relevant to the youth of this country, who take a diversified world for granted and who don't go to theatre because they don't recognize the world they live in?

I think the critics in this country need to be more proactive in contextualizing the merits of the productions they review in terms of the productions' relevance to today's audiences. I get tired of seeing the same old stories presented from the same old predominantly white perspective, and I wonder if you get a little weary of that, too. So my challenge to you and your colleagues is to try to view and review the work through a slightly different lens and comment on a particular play's appeal and resonance for a wider, more diverse contemporary audience. C'mon, start a revolution: I thought theatre and the arts were supposed to lead the way to a more progressive society. You guys have the power to help Canadian theatre find its way.

Valerie Sing Turner



Camyar Chai

"Which Box Should I Tick?"

Dear Jerry,

Smart minds weighing in on this issue indeed and all these observations are valid, as well as the fact that Vancouver has lots of great theatre companies for whom diverse casting is part of their nature. One example of many, to toot my own horn, is newworld theatre's production of *Crime and Punishment*, a classical piece normally entirely populated by people whose ethnic background might be, I don't know, English, Irish, German ...

In all honesty though, I can't believe we're still discussing this issue. I love the theatre, but please: we're supposed to be reflecting the world around us. Sometimes we get so caught up in our own theatre world that we lose sight of the world around the world around us.

These days when I'm asked about diversity I reply with a poem I've written. It's sincere and does not make light of the issue. I'm just tired of talking about these things as if it's still 1989.

(Must be read imagining a beat and that it is spoken-worded by someone who has no business rapping)

olive is my colour
 sorta brown kinda white
 sometimes pasty yellow in the wrong kind of light
 when i sit in the sun i get bronze and tanned
 in the middle of the night i look like moonlight on the sand
 i'm vancouverite iranian and muslim too
 with a touch of zoroaster and the witches brew
 i even groove on jesus though not the freaky kind
 i'm a closet li-ber-tarian with a socialist mind
 my line is aryan and arab mixed in there
 i may even have some french chocolate eclair
 my past was invaded by mon-go-lians as well
 i sometimes think chinese though outside it's hard to tell
 my son is part armenian with a dash of egyptian
 he's also got australian so he's english african
 and speaking of the continent from where my brothers come
 when i jive talk for fun my soul feels like the sun
 so you can label me coloured or caucasian classified
 if i told you that i knew i would tell you that i lied
 yesterday i looked in the mirror i was beige
 when i watch the nightly news i turn red with rage
 i'm a passionate man with a feminine side
 sometimes i'm exotic and other times i hide
 my culture is quixotic and my blood is wine
 i ain't brown i ain't white
 i'm from the human-kind



Grace Chin

"Writing Ourselves Diverse: Beyond Colour-Blind Casting"

Dear Jerry,

Casting people of different ethnicities, regardless of the ostensible ethnicity of the part(s), is certainly something we could collectively work toward achieving. Having grown up in Asia, I attest to how natural it can seem for a Chinese person to play Juliet or a South Asian person to play Tybalt. I clearly remember a professional production of *R&J* two decades ago in Malaysia—a multicultural society—in which not only was the entire cast drawn from the local acting pool, but Tybalt was played by a woman and the Nurse by a man. Was it a decent production? Yes. Was it well attended? Yes. Did the casting seem, considering the context, perfectly appropriate? Yes.

Mounting productions with parts written for people of various ethnicities—with characters named "John Kim" or "Priya Kumar"—is quite another thing, and an equally important step toward achieving more representation in the Metro Vancouver theatre scene. One letter-writer in this discussion touched on shows about the ethnic "experience," and from where I'm at there's more than enough of that still going around! There are more performers of different ethnicities now than perhaps a decade ago, but there are still few ethnic writers who create work about the contemporary Canadian experience from an ethnic perspective, never mind a Vancouver perspective. And if they did, who would produce it? Self-producing without the nonprofit umbrella is a hell of a gauntlet to run, and I speak from experience.

Some have suggested in this discussion that ethnic communities in Vancouver do not support theatre. While in Toronto last summer I attended the Potluck Festival, a script-reading festival of new work by Asian Canadian emerging playwrights—an annual affair now in its sixth year from the fu-GEN Asian Canadian theatre company at Factory Theatre, and well-attended by a diverse audience. I liked the calibre of the work and was surprised that few semi-professional or professional ethnic theatre companies in Vancouver had achieved anything similar, notwithstanding some well-attended productions at the community theatre level: Vancouver Asian Canadian Theatre and Apna Community Theatre in Surrey. For this we—the ethnic communities in Vancouver—may have few to blame but ourselves.

Some have suggested that casting and production in Vancouver may reflect the proclivities of its theatre audience. With the caveat that the work and the actor are decent, and that the marketing and promotional machine is targeting the right demographic, I respectfully submit that if you build it, they will come. If people of colour see more people of colour in the cast, if they see productions that speak to a Canadian experience they can relate to including shows that—gasp!—may even possess a multicultural sensibility in their poetic choices, they would be more inclined to come down and check it out. This includes that elusive "young" set who think *Pride & Prejudice* is, like, just a movie with Keira Knightley.

As an Asian Canadian female playwright, I have been writing and co-producing original work out of Playwrights Theatre Centre for the past few years, work that is consciously contemporary, multicultural, and set in Vancouver. Three years ago we started with a two-hander and four shows; we sold out one, primarily to an ethnic audience. Last year we mounted a production with a cast of eight and six shows; we sold out two to a more diverse audience. This year we mount our third full production (so far all have been non-Equity), and if the trend holds we hope to do better in every way than we did last year. And on it goes.

This is a fight that must be waged on all fronts, and I'm encouraged that awareness and (some) action is the beginning of actual change. But it's a pretty long road and it sure as heck don't end in Tipperary.

Grace Chin

"The Beige Stage"

Dear Jerry,

I've been following the letters about casting with diversity in mind. Perhaps a better phrase would be casting with "real life in mind." As AD of Theatre Terrific, a company that works with all kinds of diversity in performers, I find it a tiresome topic. There is such a strong entitlement element in theatre in general. My view is that theatre speaks to universal issues in which we all have a democratic stake. Love, hate, family, war, sex, work, ad infinitum. Where we fail is in assuming that these issues are interpreted correctly and, above all, safely for our ears and in our idiom by the predominant Caucasian intellectual biped.

What does an Asian man have to do with us? What does a man with Down Syndrome have to do with us? Why watch a quadriplegic woman portray Cleopatra? That's just charity. What is forgotten is that this "us" is "we" and that "we" includes every human being. What we fail to recognize is that our deep universal human concerns are universally owned by every single human being. Where we fail is that we do not value or are uncomfortable seeing and hearing "our" vital issues addressed in ways/ forms/ words/ sounds/ movements unfamiliar to us. We are stuck in the assumption that normality of race, movement, intellect, etc. is the epitome. Artistically, that is rather gutless [...]. We should know better. We should celebrate differences and actively seek them out. Without them the world and art would be one very beige place. Theatre is supposed to be subversive and testy. When it falls into comfortable, we are well into the beige stage:

"Eccentricity has always abounded where strength of character has abounded, and the amount of eccentricity in a society has in general been proportional to the amount of genius, vigour and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time." (John Stuart Mill, 1859)

A 34-year-old Asian man with Down Syndrome. A young woman living with quadriplegia. A 55-year-old wife/mother. They tackle sexual worth with humour, anger, and heart. That's what I call gutsy diversity. Come see *The Glass Box*. We're diverse and we're here.

Susanna Uchatius



Susanna Uchatius

Currently, I'm out working in the rest of the world where they seem to be quite a bit further along on this "issue." To wit, Yanna MacIntosh, an actor with silky dark brown skin, is playing Calpurnia, Titania, and Lady M at Stratford this season. I'll write more when I have time to gather my thoughts. They're scattered back over the past THIRTY YEARS!!! that I've been forced to engage (and re-engage) with this not-so-merry-go-round.

And sorry for the curt edge; it's been sharpened by the ignorance, fear, judgment and backward thinking of others who often wilfully use their God-given intelligence to find justification for excluding me and others like me from Mother Theatre, rather than embracing the Wondrousness we have to contribute. You know who you are. [...]

"If we cannot now end our differences,
at least we can help make the world safe for Diversity."
(John F. Kennedy—that's gotta be a while ago)

Lesley Ewen

Dear Jerry,

I'm glad and frustrated like some of you that the conversation is still happening. I agree with Camyar—it feels something like the 1980s. Those who have been around that long know that I was very involved in local theatre activism, including the diversity issue, in the '80s and '90s through both Equity and PACT. It got too tiring having the same conversations over and over and over again. But I am pleased to say that Headlines has reflected the diversity of the world around us in office staffing, Board membership, casting, and the kinds of stories we've told for the last twenty-five years of the company's twenty-eight year history. Other small companies manage to do the same.

It isn't rocket science. It is well beyond time to stop angsting about it ("if others would do x, then we could do y") and get on with the simple task of catching up to the general public and making local theatre production reflect the diversity of the taxpayers. This might sound harsh, but there is a practicality to it. Come to a Headlines show—our ever-transforming audience looks and sounds like the UN.

David Diamond



David Diamond

"Marginalization Still an Issue in the Arts"

Brenda Leadley



Dear Jerry,

Although Presentation House doesn't always cast non-white actors in its shows, we are passionately committed to bringing culturally diverse voices to our stage. We currently have Patti Flather's *Where the River Meets the Sea* up and running, which features four First Nations performers, but we are having difficulty attracting press. And it makes me mad that they ignore them. [...] So it seems that First Nations people are still marginalized, even in the arts. I feel passionately about supporting Aboriginal people in Canada because they have suffered greatly at the hands of colonialism. Their stories have been silenced for too long and my heart tells me that we all need to listen to them.

Brenda Leadley

"Ahhh, We're Pretending Here, Folks!"

Dear Jerry,

My mother is Scottish and has white skin.
My father is Jamaican and had dark brown skin.
It's a bit ashy now, he's dead.
My skin colour ranges from a pasty beige to a stunning cocoa, depending on the season.
Onstage, I have played a white sheep named Snowy.
Marietta Kozak believed I was a sheep. Really, she did, she said so. Ask her. Or Leslie Jones.
In *Hecuba* people believed I was Polymestor, King of Thrace, that my eyes were gouged out and that appliques on my cloak were my real live children. Go figure!
In *Ziggurat* people believed I was Cassandra, Prophetess of Troy, and I was wearing an orange fishnet dress, a blond wig, and a fake ass and tits.
Ah, the Magic of The Theatre; people'll believe anything!



Lesley Ewen

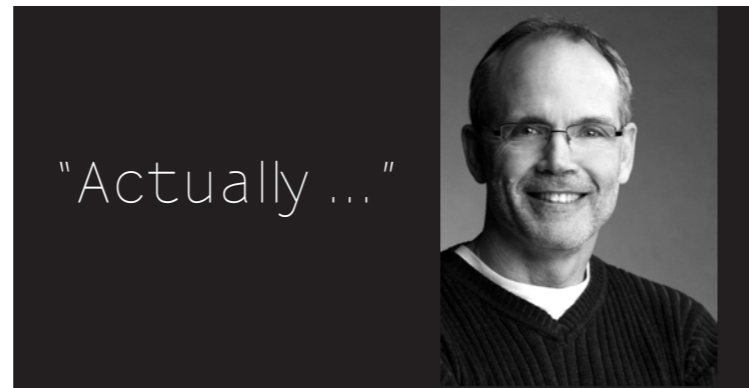
18 ALL WHITE ALL RIGHT? / by Jerry Wasserman

Dear Jerry,

A small correction for the record: none of the plays in the Playhouse 2008/09 season had all-white casts. That's not to say we are a good example of diversity on stage, but it is not true, as stated in one of the letters, that the shows were "all-white." We need to correctly acknowledge efforts and results to keep things moving forward.

Of the four plays picked by my predecessor, Glynis Leyshon, *Frost/Nixon* had three non-white actors; in *Miss Julie* two out of three were not white; one of the actors in *Toronto, Mississippi* is half-Chinese; and there is a non-white actor in *Top Girls*. In *Drowsy Chaperone*, the one play I picked, there was one non-white actor as prescribed by the self-referential text, to which we happened to add another non-white actor in a prominent role. None of this was a goal—it probably should have been—but in a world of sometimes unintentional prejudice it may be good to record the occasional unintentional inclusiveness as a small step forward.

Max Reimer



Max Reimer

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BIOS



*politics slip so easily. chant down babylon
one minute. surf the net to price my future
SUV the next.*

© Charles Johnston & Naila Keleta Mae, 2009

This research queries the political processes through which black female bodies in contemporary Canada are sexualized in everyday life in ways that uphold, disrupt, and transgress the various nations with whom we are in conversation. Within the purview of this paper then, "nation" refers not only to state-legislated geographical borders, but also to the dominating discourses within colluding and competing black nationalisms. My work is theoretically underpinned by black feminisms, black performances, and black literary studies, and is methodologically based in autoethnographic research, which explores a particular life in order to better understand a way of life (Reed-Danahay 1997; Ellis 1999; McClaurin 2001; Holt 2003). As such, this paper analyzes my published and recorded performance poem "this is my rant" to contemplate how black women in Canada manage our sexualized performances in black nationalisms from Canada, Jamaica, and the United States. Broader political implications at stake in this research include a deepened examination of the ways in which similarly sexualized bodies mobilize, disrupt, and subvert nation space in Canada and beyond.

this is my rant

just last night i was reasoning limeing with a bredren writer poet friend discussing how toxic north america is and how imperative it is that we bounce. nothing like financial privilege. continually bombarded by propaganda machines. numb. the natural result of excessive north american conditioning. numb i am. close to being immune too.

politics slip so easily. chant down babylon one minute. surf the net to price my future SUV the next.

complete with tan leather interior and brown tinted windows. not black. that's far too ghetto. and what's the alternative? actually live the politics i spew in social circles? damn all that revolution of self-talk makes me nauseous.

conveniently conscious sister. looking for a conveniently conscious significant other so we can sit back, relax and listen to the 8-track. let's talk about the sign of the times. unwind over a bottle of good south african red wine. make love 'til the sun sets again. revolutionize the world sprawled out on plush leather couches after a delicious five course meal.

i feel so inadequate.

lonely
i am
lonely

with no one to invest all my love energy into. it sucks. you hear me? it sucks.

i don't even know if i have the energy to talk politics, discuss world issues, drop names, show how well read (red) i am, be deep as i navigate my way into a whole other crew. you know, the conscious conscious really conscious black crew. you know, the crew of readers thinkers that chant down babylon with proper colonial english sophistication? the crew that differentiates between black people and niggers?

shit

then call me

call me that nigga who's tired of trying to fit. that nigga raised in so much white it seeps out of her pores when she least expects it. i'm that canadian, trying to be jamaican, african-faking nigger. hardcore exterior chick. the one who wants her clit licked on the regular 'bout to go by a vibrator type a nigga.

that creative type writer singer that sister who doesn't fit.

that platinum blond wig owning, sweet essential oil

"ANGRY BLACK BITCH SISTER NIGGER"

Sexualized Performances for the Nations

by Naila Keleta Mae

wearing, bougie, materialistic, spiritual nigga. that sister outsider wommin spirit blazing fire shy as hell type of sister nigga. that on the prowl saying she's dying to fuck but scared as hell when the time comes kinda sister. who can cum when the loving's good.

that eyebrow-plucking, armpit-shaving on occasion hairy-legged sister. the one who fluctuates from style to style from gender to gender from sanity to other sister. so yah, it's crazy right. 'cause this world has been ruled by misogynist and misandrist energy for so long and all the female energy is suspended on the cross and our blood is being shed.

that female energy
distorted circumcised manipulated
and relegated to the back
so that intellectual debates about
black
political change can occur

man

my womb is the fucking change

call me that
angry black bitch sister nigger
birthing the next generation
with no support of voice
suicide
hovers on the breath
in the realms of thought
of all the so-called
strong/ black womyn/ warriors
i know

is there room in the 'revolution' to deal with that?
[Keleta Mae, 2009]¹

As suggested in this paper's title, "this is my rant" identifies five porous overlapping spheres of sexualized performances through which black nationalisms render black female bodies hyper-visible and thus knowable. In Canada, the black female bodies perceived as angry are hypersexualized, those identified as black are heterosexualized, while the bitches are desexualized, the sisters asexualized, and the niggers sexualized as less than human. Within these moments of perception, the inhabitant of the body is somewhat akin to an "actor" with the capacity to perform these "stock characters." Of course, the performer-spectator metaphor that I am signaling is not an equitable relationship in the lives of black women in Canada whose (his)stories include being the actual and/or perceived property of the ancestors of those who constitute our everyday audiences.

Mae Gwendolyn Henderson provides a particularly insightful theorization of black women writers' use of "multivocality" to articulate counter-narratives on multiple planes. "Black women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women,

with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women" (Henderson, 20). One of the shifts that is increasingly prevalent, however, is the change in the racial and ethnic composition of black women's audiences in Canada. But this remains juxtaposed

*even those audience members
who do not identify as white
or black are deeply familiar
with these outrageous imagi-
naries about black femininity.*

against the dominating discourse in white imperialism and black nationalism of black female bodies as sites of invisibility, inhumanity, and immorality. Such that, I would argue, even those audience members who do not identify as white or black are deeply familiar with these outrageous imaginaries about black femininity. In this regard, interesting opportunities exist to further Henderson's tenants of "multivocality" as black women writers increasingly negotiate speaking to non-white and non-black women and men who have been socialized by legacies of white imperialism and black nationalism's violent fantasies of black femaleness.

In choosing to converse primarily with three black nationalisms, "this is my rant" attempts to forego familiar analysis of the systemic inequities that plague the implicitly white status quo and offer instead a thoughtfully provocative critique of dominating discourses within multiple manifestations of black nationalism. One of the central challenges that "this is my rant" grapples with, then, is how to adequately articulate an expansive, nuanced black female reality in ways that disrupt the imperial cultural domination that black nationalisms so often enact through and on black female bodies. In particular, the performance poem seeks to interrogate these black nationalisms' (his)historical and contemporary practices of charting black female bodies as geographical nation spaces. And while available spaces for attentive articulations and mindful perceptions of black female bodies in these nation spaces often appear limited, it is important to underscore that they are not foreclosed. Henderson provides another productive theoretical framework called "simultaneity of discourse" that suggests ways in which black women writers evoke, occupy, and contest various ways of knowing and being known.

[Simultaneity of discourse] is meant to signify a mode of reading which examines the ways in which the perspectives of race and gender, and their interrelationships, structure the discourse of black women writers. Such an approach is intended to acknowledge and overcome the limitations imposed by assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity) in racial and gendered readings of works by black women writers. [16]

An even more productive reading of black women writers emerges, if we consider Henderson's

troubling of a static interiority along with Patricia Hill Collins' insightful critique of African American feminists of the Hip Hop Generation. Collins argues that they politicize interior personal-identity narratives in popular culture without substantive attention to exterior life: namely, how black women organize to respond to the structural social conditions that deeply inform their lives (188). As a black Canadian member of the Hip Hop generation, I suspect that I am prone to this oversight and I am deeply concerned about the perils of personal interrogation without broader political context. As such, this research also queries the engagement of "this is my rant" with multiple contested interior and exterior identities.

While Henderson's "simultaneity of discourse" astutely draws our attention to the interplay of race and gender, I would argue that we must also frame black women's writing in Canada, Jamaica, and the United States as being in constant conversation with class. For example, in the first stanza of "this is my rant" I quickly signal my general class position by mentioning my economic and geographical means, "nothing like financial privilege" and "excessive North American conditioning." And while my performance poem grapples with the ethics and inequalities of black nationalisms, it is also simultaneously fraught with references to my broad access to class-defining consumerism, "politics slip so easily. chant down babylon one minute. surf the net to price my future SUV the next." In Jamaica's Rastafarian culture—an oft uncredited seminal force in Jamaica's black nationalism—Babylon refers to (his)historical and contemporary economic, religious, intellectual, physical, and other oppressions experienced by black people from the TransAtlantic Slave Trade onward. Dominant Jamaican culture has a long and violent (his)story of repressing Rastafarianism's black nationalist politics, which fiercely locates itself within a Rastafarian black liberation theology often expressed through reggae music. So "this is my rant" is in conversation with class when it drops the Babylon rhetoric of the lower class black liberation movement that Rastafarianism signals, and replaces it with a material consumption that signals middle class to Jamaican, Canadian, and US black nationalisms—the proverbial SUV.

My assertion of class in "this is my rant" continues, "complete with tan leather interior and brown tinted windows. not black. that's far too ghetto." This privileging of tan and brown and devaluation of black connotes shadism, a Jamaican skin shade politics that has its roots in British colonialism, wherein skin shade corresponds to class status and social mobility. Shadism embodies violent racial legacies of colonization; therefore, lighter skin signals middle class insofar as it suggests the presence of white British ancestry, humanity, intelligence, etc., while darker skin signals working class by suggesting black African ancestry, savageness, a lack of intelligence, and so on. The politics of shadism also undoubtedly inform perceptions of available sexual spaces for those who inhabit black female bodies in Jamaica and in diasporic Jamaican cultures. As Jamaica moves further into independence and further away from overt British colonial rule, increasingly various shades of people occupy class strata that likely would have been inaccessible to them in the past. Yet, there

is still no room for black in "this is my rant's" SUV—that prized middle class possession and symbol of heteronormativity—because symbolically black remains "far too ghetto."

It is important to note that within the spectrum of black nationalisms that inform this paper's terrain of inquiry, "ghetto" has different meanings. Indeed, they all signal extreme poverty as defined by their state-legislated geographical borders and they are all symbolized through the bodies of black people. Arguably, however, in the US "ghetto" is also a popular culture aesthetic and commodity, while in Canada it is also used as an adjective that indicates a momentary slippage in class performance. Given its shadism politics, "ghetto" in Jamaica also connotes darker skin such that a "ghetto slam" is an implicitly heterosexual black lower-working class woman who "is believed to have the physical make-up that makes her suitable for engagement in overtly physical displays of sexual activity [with men]" (Hope, 40).

In its published, recorded, and live performances, "this is my rant" only makes modest efforts to disturb the heteronormativity that is prevalent in the black nationalisms it queries. "this is my rant" subtly gestures towards non-heterosexual orientations with an obscure reference to the song lyrics of bisexual African American artist Me'shell N'degeocello; a reference to the title of a seminal book by black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde; and a comment about fluctuating from "gender to gender" (Keleta Mae, 2009).

The veiled engagement of "this is my rant" with heterosexism is deeply informative given the poem's willingness to explicitly interrogate so many other tenets of black nationalisms' institutionalized cultures of domination. Perhaps its modest efforts in this area reflect a larger challenging project that Collins identifies in black nationalism in the United States: "Of race, class, gender, and sexuality as systems of oppression, for many people, heterosexism as a system of power remains the most difficult to understand and, in many cases, to even see as being a system of oppression" (19). I would argue that Collins' analysis is also deeply resonant in Jamaica's black nationalism in which heteronormativity is a central tenet of dominant culture.

But I knew heterosexism to be a system of oppression at the time of the text's composition and publication; and in Canada's black nationalism, heterosexism is increasingly recognized as a system of oppression. However, I would assert that heterosexism persists in each of these manifestations of black nationalism because it is thought to protect the only acceptable model of family and community—two spaces within which black female bodies are routinely collapsed in service of a national vision. Subsequently, I would argue that any substantive articulation of the many other sexual orientations that black female bodies occupy is perceived as a threat to black nationalism's territorial claims to family and community.

In a pivotal moment in "this is my rant," when it was critical to speak simultaneously to the three black nationalisms about the substance of our "intel-

24 ANGRY BLACK BITCH SISTER NIGGER / by Naila Keleta Mae

lectual debates” and the need for “black political change,” the performance poem reverts to the valuation of black female bodies as prime reproductive commodities (Keleta Mae, 2009). The declarations of “this is my rant” are emphatic, “my womb is the fucking change” and black women are, “birthing the next generation with no support or voice.” In those words I move through three sexualized performances: the language of “my womb” signals the asexualized stock performance of sister; “fucking,” the hypersexualized performance of angry; and “birthing,” the heterosexualized performance of black.

Informatively, in that specific moment of multivocality and simultaneity of discourse, I perceived that there was no room for the desexualized performance of bitch or the sexualized performance of less-than-human that nigger space connotes. Is it reasonable to infer then that angry, black, and sister are the most accessible or readable performance sites for black women who want to discuss the future of black nationalisms? If so, to what extent does “this is my rant” collude with the same authoritative structures of black nationalisms that it seeks to topple through its choices around which sexualized performances to invoke at pivotal moments in the text?

My frustrations with the multiple performances necessary to converse with black nationalisms are readily apparent in “this is my rant”—“i don’t even know if i have the energy to talk politics, discuss world issues, drop names, show how well read [red] i am, be ‘deep’ as i navigate my way into a whole other crew. you know the conscious conscious really conscious black crew.” Curiously, this foreclosure of discussion (not having “the energy” for civic engagement) has embedded within it a triple entendre, a multivocality that I had not consciously considered in its composition. The double entendre I sought to reference with “read [red]” was “red” as in a Jamaican Rastafarian word for being high from marijuana. However, in Jamaican reggae music culture, “red” has another very specific sexualized meaning. “The redness of the labia denotes a healthy, strong vagina, and by extension, a healthy, strong, aggressive woman whose submission or subjugation is symbolized by the forceful, painful removal and negation of the healthy red of the labia. Hence, Spragga Benz’s [dancehall artist] exhortation to ‘dig out di red’” (Hope, 49).

I grew up hearing that Spragga Benz song and so many other explicit, violent dancehall reggae lyrics. I grew up with hip hop and dancehall, both cultures finding expression, invoking sexualizations, and articulating black nationalisms in the basements, high schools, gymnasiums, and backyards that housed the parties of my youth in Toronto. “Ram it and jack it and rev out the hole,” Spragga Benz would sing. As teenagers my girlfriends and I would sometimes stop dancing on the dance floor in utter protest to a song we found particularly offensive. Maybe because we listened to Queen Latifah and thought black nationalism meant Ladies First. We folded our arms. Refused to whine (a way of dancing to reggae music). We performed disinterest. No teenage boy was good enough.

As teenagers my girlfriends and I would sometimes stop dancing on the dance floor in utter protest to a song we found particularly offensive.

But some nights, between the dancehall and hip hop lyrics of the most popular songs, there wasn’t much music left to dance to—and we wanted to dance. We picked our battles. When we danced with the teenage boys, we whined our bodies harder—nothing soft in our developing black female frames. “Rev out the hole? Whose hole?” was our silent counter refrain, “You couldn’t if you tried.”

suicide
hovers on the breath
in the realms of thought
of all the so-called
strong/ black womyn/ warriors
i know

Death is on the breath, below the surface of the bravado of “this is my rant” and the endless strength so often attributed to those who inhabit black female bodies. The reference to suicide is an effort to underscore the urgency of black females’ calls for equality and social justice within the black nationalisms that deeply inform many of our lives. The aforementioned excerpt of “this is my rant” is an explicit articulation that, whatever the sexualized performance ascribed to black female bodies by audiences and performers, the stakes are exceedingly high. Desires to communicate are great. Frustrations at the perceptions of the limitations of language and space are palpable.

And so, the questions that continue to haunt this research include: Which dominating sexualized performances of black female bodies are made invisible in “this is my rant”? Which other dominating streams of thought in black nationalisms does “this is my rant” mobilize, trouble, and transgress? And, of course, what’s next?



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NOTE

¹ An expanded version of this text was first published in a magazine in 2002 under my then name, Naila Belvett. In the years following, I revised, performed, titled, and recorded it as “this is my rant.” In June 2009, I released it as a song on my album *bloom*; readers can download the song at www.nailakeletamae.com. All further quotations are taken from the 2009 version.

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BIO

Naila Keleta Mae IS AN ACCOMPLISHED INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST, EDUCATOR, AND SCHOLAR WHO HAS WORKED IN BRAZIL, CANADA, FRANCE, PORTUGAL, SOUTH AFRICA, AND THE US. SHE IS ON FACULTY AT GODDARD COLLEGE, IS A PH.D CANDIDATE AT YORK UNIVERSITY, AND IS A JOSEPH-ARMAND BOMBARDIER CANADA GRADUATE SCHOLAR. HER ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THIS ISSUE OF *ALT.THEATRE* FEATURES THE SONG “THIS IS MY RANT” FROM HER THIRD ALBUM, *BLOOM* (2009), AVAILABLE FOR FREE AT WWW.NAILAKELETAMAE.COM

building A THEATRE WITHOUT WALLS

Anusree Roy Interviews Andy McKim

ANDY MCKIM ASSUMED ARTISTIC DIRECTION OF THEATRE PASSE MURAILLE IN SPRING 2007. THIS IS A COMPOSITE INTERVIEW THAT TOOK PLACE AT VARIOUS TIMES BETWEEN OCTOBER 2008 AND APRIL 2009. DATES HAVE BEEN ADDED FOR CLARIFICATION.

Anusree: What is your overall vision for Theatre Passe Muraille?

Andy: I was attracted to working at Theatre Passe Muraille because of its historical practices and I believe that the vision I have for the theatre is consistent with its history. I needed to bring a determination to distinguish it, as much as possible, from Factory Theatre and Tarragon Theatre and maybe, to some extent, Buddies in Bad Times. The wonderful thing about the Toronto theatrical community is that we have a repertoire of new play development practices so that all the theatres have something different to offer audiences.

Anusree: What specific aspects of Theatre Passe Muraille's historical practices do you want to continue?



Future Folk: Catherine Hernandez, Karen Ancheta, Aura Carcueva © Alex Felipe

Andy: One is that it has a long history of supporting collaboratively creative work. In Paul Thompson's time at TPM, it was called "Collective Creation," but collaboratively created work is an inclusive term for a wide variety of developmental models. This is in contrast to Tarragon, which has been a very strong home for the playwright-driven project, as has Factory. Second, what for me is really attractive is that TPM has always had a strong relationship with independent artists and their companies and has found as many ways as it could to support their work either by directly producing them or facilitating their work in some way. The third part of my vision that I think has been a corner stone of Theatre Passe Muraille is the way that it has been dedicated to uncovering, supporting, presenting, and promoting the emerging artist, the marginal voice. I think one of the many high-water marks of my predecessor Layne Coleman's legacy is his understanding that emerging artists and marginal independent voices led him and me naturally to a broad repertoire of intercultural companies and works. The theatre has always been a home for multidisciplinary work—from the visual to the musical to dance—and that is something of interest to me as well.

Anusree: You often speak of "cultural communities," of trying to represent them on the Passe Muraille stage: what are the ideas that inform these choices?

Andy: I aspire to represent the community of Toronto. My interest is in advocating choices that are inclusive

while not being strictly ethno-specific at any given moment—by trying to imagine a theatre where a variety of stories are being told that are consistent with all of the values that I have already mentioned. One wouldn't want to make the work accessible by homogenizing a voice, but one would want the work to be accessible by having some understanding of who the audience is beyond one's own self. Who do we want to speak to? Who do we want to share these stories with? I am interested in looking for artists who want to share these stories broadly. There are some theatre companies whose work is perhaps more ethno-specific and that is an important constituent element of our theatrical environment. I want our work to be accessible and inclusive of a broad audience while at the same time being specific within itself.

What I find to be a particular strength in your own work as a playwright-actor is that its people, context, time, and place are all very specific. And although it may not even be within the city limits, I still believe that you are talking about a story that is of human interest to me, political interest to me, social interest to me—and when I see you tell your story, I personally feel included as one of your audience members.

Your partner in the main space [2008-09], Anita Majumdar, exhibits the same strengths for me. In her play *The Misfit*, she is telling a story set in India about a woman who has been affected by the practice of honour killings. But—as became evident in the three



Letters to My Grandma: Anusree Roy © Alex Felipe

panel discussions we held during the run of the play—Anita's work is powerful and accessible for a broad audience because it is a story about the broader issue of violence towards women in our world.

The first discussion focused on women's human rights in India and the rest of the world, and the second on women's human rights in India and Canada. That was so illuminating, in part because the panels were made up of women from various cultural communities. Their talking of how the play spoke to them about a broader issue is testimony to what I am seeking by programming this work. The last panel was a discussion between Anita and Deepa Mehta that was very artist-centric, but it affirmed the desire they had to attract as broad a group of cultural communities for their audience as possible.

Anusree: What are the reasons behind your repertoire choices for this year [2008-09]?

Andy: This year I wanted the sum total of the choices to proclaim an idea of what this theatre is about and to act as a magnet to other artists—so they would say, "Oh, that theatre is interested in showcasing that kind of work." This season of nine plays includes all the ones we are producing ourselves and the ones we are hosting. We're starting with Andy Jones, who I think is the Passe Muraille classic original independ-

ent theatre artist. He has been working at the theatre off and on ever since the days of Codco, which was formed when Paul Thompson gave some money to a number of interesting Newfoundland artists and said, "Here is some money, work as a group, go write together, and put a show together." This is early evidence of how TPM was supporting emergent artists, and that early approach has borne fruit in Andy Jones. I wanted to find some fun things for people to see and enjoy, as part of a celebration of what we are about as a theatre. Andy fit that bill—he is such a political animal, a very social animal, who has a lot to say about the world we are living in.

I was also trying to find some work that is of particular interest to the twenty to thirty-year-old audience. Tracy Dawson is an emerging artist with a strong voice and something to say to a younger as well as a broader audience. We are showcasing her on the mainstage with her new production, *Them & Us*. I have been working with her for about a year and a half on her script in the traditional ways one works with a writer—workshopping it on our own and workshopping it at the Shaw Festival, thanks to their kindness and support.

Her play is about the difficulties inherent in trying to find a mate, to find a love partner. This sounds like an age-old story, a familiar story, but I think what makes

her work particularly attractive to me is that she is representing a moment in time when it is particularly challenging for people to connect as love partners. I think it seems to be filled with challenges that I didn't face. And I think she is exploring those challenges in a way that is very funny, so it is acceptable. The way she has structured her play is not with one set of characters and one storyline, but with a multitude of characters, a variety of storylines, and a variety of theatrical forms. They all add up to a kind of front-line report about *Them & Us*. This dating jungle is a metaphoric truth for a much larger issue: I think of how we would imagine "them and us" in last fall's federal election. The question that I had for myself when I looked at the plays I had selected was, "How are we treating each other?" I look at the selection and was astonished at the ways we are treating each other in this election. What level of respect do we have for each other? What level of self-interest do we display in our interactions with each other as compared to, maybe, being more empathetic?

Anusree: What are some of the relationships between producing your own work and serving as a space for other companies?

Andy: On one end of the scale, the Tracy Dawson project was exclusively produced by TPM. We had no other partners in its developmental process. It is important that TPM is balancing our support of projects that begin outside the building with some projects that are perhaps more playwright-driven or at least are initiated and developed by me. I don't see my role here as being the one responsible for a "house aesthetic." I want to facilitate a broader range of work. But I hope the scale goes all the way over, even to the rental [companies]. I want our institution to bring different artists and projects together in one place so that our audience can enjoy that range of work. An example of this range is evident in our six resident companies: Volcano Theatre Company, Obsidian Theatre Company, Carlos Bulosan Theatre, Theatre Rusticle, Small Wooden Shoe, and 2b Theatre Company.

Anusree: In what ways does TPM support these resident companies?

Andy: We have monthly meetings to talk about shared interests and concerns and ways that we can support each other and move each other's work forward and collaborate on promotional plans. Also, we offer each of the resident companies a week of free space with or without tech, depending on what they need.

Volcano Theatre is doing this enormous production, *Africa Trilogy*, and we reserved three weeks in the main space for them to do a workshop production. It allows them to be working in a theatre space with tech. They are partnering with us this season [2008-09] on *Appetite*. Volcano is mandated to do two different kinds of work. One is ambitious, politically motivated story telling and the other is work that's trying to push the boundary of theatricality.

ONE WOULDN'T WANT TO MAKE THE WORK ACCESSIBLE BY HOMOGENIZING A VOICE, BUT ONE WOULD WANT THE WORK TO BE ACCESSIBLE BY HAVING SOME UNDERSTANDING OF WHO THE AUDIENCE IS BEYOND ONE'S OWN SELF.



Obsidian, devoted to the Black diaspora, will be using our venue for one week, within the next six months, to develop a play with a workshop in the Backspace.

Carlos Bulosan Theatre, a Filipino-specific theatre company, used our Backspace for a week this winter to present its new play festival, which went really well.

Theatre Rusticle, a movement-based theatre company, is in our main space in the summer for a week, doing a workshop development. The company wants to bring in some of the design elements, since these will inform the story telling. Then we will present them "in association with TPM" in our 2009-10 season.

Small Wooden Shoe is interested in staging work that has expositional elements to it. The company will think of a topic and want to explain it to the audience, like *The Seven Revolutions*, which is on right now. We've provided office space for them, which means we're acting as peers and mentors for each other.

The last company, 2b Theatre Company, is based in Halifax though they spend half their time in Toronto. The two members, Christian Barry and Anthony Black, are extraordinarily smart, young directors/writers. They explore theatrical conventions but also

look for stories that have popular, political messages. I'm doing a workshop of a new Hannah Moscovitch play they are developing.

Anusree: Was there a specific personal objective you had in mind for the institution when you decided to come to Theatre Passe Muraille?

Andy: Yes. What was so exciting was that when I realized that it was time to make a transition in my professional life, Theatre Passe Muraille was the answer to my question "Now what do I want to do?" [...] The metaphor in my mind that made the most sense was that Theatre Passe Muraille is a prism as opposed to a magnifying glass. So rather than focusing the contributions of everyone down to a fine point, I hope the institution refracts all of the contributions into a multiplicity. I mean, in this case, of colours—and I don't mean it specifically in the sense of skin colour. Of course, it has that resonance, but the beam goes in and then it comes out with these very distinct colours. And it's that range of very distinct colours that forms the result of our institution, interest, and values.

Anusree: Do you see a relationship between TPM's foundational "revolutionary vision" and "practices" with what you and your colleagues are actually achieving today?

Andy: Yes and no.

The "no" because part of the reason that these theatres started is because we had no theatrical voice as a country. Our dramatic canon started at about the same time as Theatre Passe Muraille. The revolution of proclaiming that our own stories were meritorious enough to be put on the stage and had an audience is not as consequential now as it was then. Five years ago in a PACT survey of member theatres across the country, more than 70 percent of the work being produced was written or adapted or translated by a Canadian. So we have a huge success story on our hands.

The "yes" because dealing with the development and production of new work is a definition of revolutionary activity. So we need to equip ourselves to respond to the wonderful challenge that tomorrow will bring: the challenge of the story that needs to be told, the artist who should be seen, and the company that needs to be showcased. That is the life blood for all of us.

Anusree: What are your thoughts about the kinds of critical responses Passe Muraille's work has been receiving or is likely to receive?

Andy: I think it is possible to overestimate the importance of the traditional means of talking about our work, and by that I mean either placing ads in traditional places or having the traditional reviewer speak well of what we are doing. Those things are good and the theatre sometimes benefits from them. But I think I certainly have in the past underestimated the importance, the value, the power, the necessity for us as artists to be responsible for promoting and contextualizing the work that we do. We need to take more responsibility for talking about the merits of other people's work. For example, with the resident companies and with the companies in our season, we suggested a plan where everybody on a monthly basis will send out a calendar of events including anything going on in the building or anything that's going on with a company that is part of their season taking place outside. And we have all agreed to write (over the year) three e-mail messages about work we are particularly interested in and would like to promote to our core audience.

Anusree: How is that working for you?

Andy: It has been hit and miss. The problem we have been having is that with the avalanche of e-mail correspondence inundating people it is now very difficult to write mass e-mails without a really good reason for it. That has meant that each of us has tended to hold back on the number of messages we send out about other companies due to our concern about not wearing out our welcome with our readership.

Anusree: What about newspapers? How do they fit into the mix?

Andy: They don't have as much space for the arts as they did ten years ago, twenty years ago; interviews and all those kinds of things are harder to come by. So it's become more and more difficult for newspaper writers to promote us. Not only that, but this situation also makes it difficult for them to be advocates for the work.

Anusree: TPM recently hosted the very successful BUZZ festival [March 2009]: what was your vision behind that?

Andy: The BUZZ festival was successful beyond my expectations. It's an opportunity for us to increase the meaningful interactions between the audiences, the staff, and the artists. BUZZ is really an attempt to provide a play development setting for collaboratively developed work that includes an audience—so they are in a sense the advocates, the army of supporters for the work. Our festival is also a chance find out

THE METAPHOR IN MY MIND THAT MADE THE MOST SENSE WAS THAT THEATRE PASSE MURAILLE IS A PRISM AS OPPOSED TO A MAGNIFYING GLASS.

what audiences' interests are. The whole format is a lot of fun! Festival nights were supposed to be two hours long but audiences stayed for three hours to see the work and afterwards to talk in the bar with artists.

Anusree: Daniel David Moses' *Almighty Voice and His Wife* just opened at TPM [March 2009] and *City of Wine* will run in May [2009]. Could you elaborate your interest in these two shows and their respective companies?

Andy: TPM is developing a strong relationship with Native Earth. It is not one of the companies in residence, but we do have strong affiliations and are interested in being a venue for their work. This year two of their three projects were at TPM, and next season [2009-10] we're happy to say we're going to be home for all three of their projects. *City Of Wine* is an extraordinary project. We really lobbied to get that project. It presents the work of seven conservatory-style acting programs across the country in the one event linked by the writer Ned Dickens creating a theatrical cycle about the ancient city of Thebes. We're going to have hundreds of young people in the building interacting with us and with one another. This is one of the most, if not *the most*, ambitious new play development projects ever. One man, seven plays, one theatre, hundreds of actors. Just to be part of such a grand, crazy scheme is a joy for us.

Anusree: Could you give a sneak-peak at your 2009-2010 season? What types of shows can the TPM audience expect?

Andy: There will be five plays in our subscription season. Your *Letters To My Grandma* will of course be one of them. It's worth noting we've already provided you with some support by making the theatre space available free of charge to your company. It was reviewed, but that doesn't mean the work on the play is going to end. Next year will be a longer run with a higher profile for the work and that creates an opportunity for you to develop the work between now and then to its next level of excellence.

Other works in the season are BASH'd, a show from the Toronto fringe that went on to great acclaim both nationally and off-Broadway. It's important for me to have one show a year that is an example of the greatest excellence within our independent artist community—this is that kind of show.

Also, we're excited to be collaborating with the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company on a production by Convergence Theatre of *Yichud / Seclusion*. It takes place in a contemporary Toronto orthodox Jewish community and is about love, sex, honour, and respect. It's a magnificent show—I can't wait.

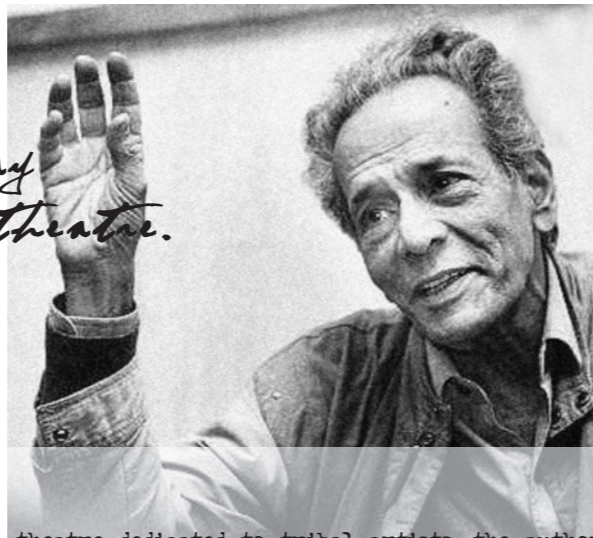
We've three contrasting vital works in the Backspace, including not only your play but *Future Folk*, Sulong Theatre Collective's piece. It incorporates Filipino folk dance as a traditional art form, which is the vehicle for telling the story about the situation in Toronto that Filipino nannies find themselves in. The last play on our list, *Such Creatures*, is a new pair of one-act monologues written by Judith Thompson. She'll return to the Backspace thirty years after she first burst onto the scene in the Backspace with the revolutionary play *The Crackwalker*. The associated shows next season are Carmen Aguirre's *The Refugee Hotel*, Maja Ardal's *You Fancy Yourself*, and Allyson McMackon's *Birnam Wood*.

Anusree Roy'S THEATRE CREDITS INCLUDE PLAYWRIGHT AND PERFORMER OF *LETTERS TO MY GRANDMA* AND *PYAASA*, WINNER OF TWO DORA MAVOR MOORE AWARDS [OUTSTANDING NEW PLAY AND OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE], SHE IS CURRENTLY A PLAYWRIGHT-IN-RESIDENCE AT THE CANADIAN STAGE COMPANY, WRITING HER NEW PLAY, *BROTHEL # 9*, AND SHE WILL BE THE PLAYWRIGHT-IN-RESIDENCE OF THEATRE PASSE MURAILLE TO WRITE *FIRE AS THE WITNESS*—A PLAY ABOUT THE BRIDE BURNINGS OF INDIA.

Andy McKim IS A NATIONALLY RENOWNED DIRECTOR AND DRAMATURGE WHO HAS WORKED IN THEATRE FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS. HE IS BEST KNOWN FOR HIS WORK DEVELOPING AND DIRECTING COUNTLESS NEW CANADIAN PLAYS, INCLUDING *TWO PIANOS*, *FOUR HANDS*. HE RECEIVED THE GEORGE LUSCOMBE AWARD IN 2007 AND WAS PRESIDENT OF THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CANADIAN THEATRES AND THE TORONTO ALLIANCE FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS, AS WELL AS A MEMBER OF THE DORA MAVOR MOORE AWARDS BOARD.

For what I have to say
the medium was the theatre.

- Habib Tanvir (1923 - 2009)



The founder of India's first professional theatre dedicated to tribal artists, the author of a rich body of plays, the subject of countless books and publications, the recipient of the highest national art awards and nine honorary doctorates, a nominated member of Rajya Sabha—Habib Tanvir represents, in himself, an entire era of Indian theatre.

Habib Tanvir died on June 8, 2009. What could there be to say about him that hasn't already been said? Yet there are a few things that are not so well known about Habib Tanvir: my collaboration with him on two of my plays (*Bhopal* and *Truth and Treason*) and his contribution to making Canadian plays visible in India.

Bhopal is based on the 1984 gas tragedy at India's Union Carbide factory, which has been described as the Hiroshima of the chemical industry. While the seeds of writing *Bhopal* were planted in my mind immediately after the tragedy, the actual play did not emerge until Habib Tanvir conducted a workshop in Montreal in 1998. It is this workshop that provided me with the critical questions that would keep the play rooted in local culture yet relevant for global audiences. The play premiered in Montreal in 2001, was subsequently translated into Hindi/Chattisgarhi as *Zahreeli Hawa* by Tanvir, and was produced across India under his direction.

The 9/11 terrorist attack brought to the fore many questions long suppressed by the US government and its colluding media: Was September 11, 2001, a solitary event? Who are the desperate people who resort to terror for political goals? Who are those who wage war in the name of common good? Why has the US attacked an entire country to punish a handful of suspected terrorists while the CEO of the Union Carbide, with 20,000 dead on his resume, roams free in the US? Who is the real terrorist? Conversation with Habib Tanvir on these questions gave birth to my second collaboration with him—*Truth and Treason*.

For Tanvir, theatre was not merely a celebratory performance but for upholding social justice and good cultural values. He wrote two songs for *Zahreeli Hawa* and he integrated the tribal theory of creation into the play. Those familiar with Indian tribal theatre noticed that he had skillfully woven a *Gond* myth of creation into a contemporary play with great cultural sensibility and presentational beauty. Tanvir couldn't divorce theatre from the country's cultural traditions and socio-political context. He gave voice to an indigenous theatre by using traditional forms and techniques of tribal artists of Chattisgarh, working side by side with urban actors using local idioms, and telling transcultural tales of contemporary relevance.

Habib Tanvir never fell into the trap of valorizing folkloric exoticism. He personified collective experiences of the tribal communities in the form of traditions that revealed richness and the rational beauty of life itself. Similarly, at *Teesri Duniya*, we have resisted displaying folkloric exotica and novelties of culturally diverse communities, and have emphasized the lived experiences and aesthetics from which cultural traditions are supposed to have evolved. This was the most profound impact Tanvir had on *Teesri Duniya Theater's* work. In our last meeting, he told me that if health permitted he would like to direct *Truth and Treason* in Canada. We didn't have that opportunity, but we dedicate *Truth and Treason* to him. We celebrate his life with more meaningful theatre.

Rahul Varma

BIO

RAHUL VARMA IS A MONTREAL-BASED PLAYWRIGHT AND FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF TEESRI DUNIYA THEATRE

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The Ecstasy of Rita Joe

About ten days into the rehearsal process for *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, the 2009 co-production between Western Canada Theatre and the National Arts Centre, a frustrated actor snapped, "I am not used to workshopping an existing script! I know how to workshop a new play, but I didn't expect to be workshopping a script that's been around for forty years!"

I thought about his anger for twenty-four hours and then realized he was mostly right; we were workshopping the script, and through the process, we were actually translating it, adapting it, from a play that had been written from a position in the dominant culture to one that expresses the reality of its subject, the Native people marginalized within their own country. There was no way for us, a company of primarily Aboriginal theatre artists, to approach the text, forty years old or not, without shifting the gaze.

George Ryga's play about the young Native woman Rita Joe was written in 1967, and opened the National Arts Centre in 1969; hence the anniversary production. But the play has been problematic for Aboriginal artists since its debut when the non-Native Frances Hyland played the title role. It is a seminal play in Canadian theatre, examining the relationship between the First People and the settlers, but it was written by a white man, helmed by white directors, produced by mainstream companies.

This production attempted to redress some of that history. Both the director and choreographer were Native, and the music, which has been such an integral part of every production, was replaced with new music co-composed by Native musicians Michelle St John and Jennifer Kreisberg. The cast was nine Native actors representing a half-dozen nations, and four non-Native men.

Suddenly, the things that Ryga wrote about, about wanting and not having, about standing in line and not being seen, had a more profound resonance. Ryga wrote things he *knew*, but they are things we *live*. He wrote of women who were used and discarded, who died from lack of care, but we are the ones who have been yelling about five hundred missing women, about the barber who drank women to death, and the pig farmer who harvested them. He wrote of the challenges of having no future on the reserve, and the dangers of the city, and here we were, a bunch of displaced Indians gathered from Toronto and Calgary and Vancouver to animate his words.

Yes, we were workshopping the play, because we had to filter everything, everything through our own filters, our experience as Algonquins, Wampanoga, Cree, Metis, Blood, Mohawks, our experiences as the children of residential school survivors, as urban Aboriginals, as educated Natives, as Hollywood Indians. And our non-Native colleagues had to filter through their experiences as white men in a country that has apologized for its treatment of us, their colleagues. We had to be in the room together, discussing whether anything has changed in the forty years since the play debuted.

Yvette Nolan

BIO

YVETTE NOLAN IS A PLAYWRIGHT, DIRECTOR, AND DRAMATURGE. HER PLAYS INCLUDE *BLADE*, *JOB'S WIFE*, *VIDEO*, AND *ANNIE MAE'S MOVEMENT*. DIRECTING CREDITS INCLUDE *THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE* (WESTERN CANADA THEATRE/NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE), *ANNIE MAE'S MOVEMENT* (NATIVE EARTH), *THE FASTING GIRL*, *FREE'S POINT* (NAKAI THEATRE), *A VERY POLITE GENOCIDE*, *DEATH OF A CHIEF*, *THE UNNATURAL AND ACCIDENTAL WOMEN*, *TALES OF AN URBAN INDIAN* (NATIVE EARTH), AND *THE TRIPLE TRUTH*, *THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN...* (TURTLE GALS). SHE IS CURRENTLY THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF NATIVE EARTH PERFORMING ARTS.

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THE APPLIED THEATRE READER

EDITED BY TIM PRENTKI AND SHEILA PRESTON



BOOK REVIEW

“Opportunities to converse civilly across ... differences”

by Juliana Saxton

THE APPLIED THEATRE READER.
Edited by Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston.

London and New York: Routledge, 2009. Pp. 380

The title of this review is drawn from a quote by playwright Marty Pottenger cited by Jan Cohen-Cruz in her contribution to *The Applied Theatre Reader* (293). It reflects what the many different authors see as lying at the heart of their practice, whether it is Theatre for Development, Theatre in Health Education, Prison Theatre, or the many other forms of practice that can be assembled under the “very capacious portman-teau term” (Giesekam 91) of applied theatre.

Theatre’s age-old purpose is to engage our minds and raise emotions by catching attention and capturing our interest so that, as Horace would have it, we are both entertained and instructed. Mainstream and commercial theatre have always used the former as a means of camouflaging the latter. The very thought of theatre being didactic is anathema to many theatre artists; to have the spectator leave the theatre having been “wrung out” emotionally through laughter, tears, fear, or awe is the mark of success. Applied theatre’s responsibility, on the other hand, is that raising spectators’ feelings—often to the point of drawing them onto the stage in a physically, as well as mentally, committed action of response to the material presented (see the *ur-intervention* story told by Adrian Jackson in his chapter, “Provoking Intervention” [43])—is only

one essential of a number of steps in the process of entertaining and instructing. It is in the conversations with first-person resources, between the players themselves as they work, and among audience, players, and facilitators post performance that the potential for shifting perspectives lies and the possibilities for change and, sometimes, courses for action are revealed. This “civil discourse” is what is at the heart of applied theatre and in it rests its purposes: to generate awareness; to share what Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston call “the hidden stories of a community” (9) that uncover concerns that, for many different reasons, have been unspoken; to give a voice to the voiceless and marginalized; to find, in Philip Taylor’s (2006) words, “links and connections for all of us committed to the power of theatre in making a difference in the human lifespan” (93).

For some time we have been waiting for a text that brings together the many different kinds of applied theatre practices that, for the past twenty years, have been documented, analyzed, researched, recorded, or simply effected without being written up formally. *The Applied Theatre Reader* is just that text. Each of the six sections—Poetics of representation; Ethics of representation; Participation; Intervention; Border crossing and Transformation—is contextualized by one of

the editors. A selection of thought-provoking extracts offers philosophical considerations before chapters on the practice itself.

While a number of these writers may be already familiar to us (for example, Mikhail Bakhtin, John Willett, Augusto Boal, Edward Bond, Dorothy Heathcote, Paolo Freire), the inclusion of other cultural, pedagogical, and philosophical theorists, as well as practitioners such as Chantal Mouffe, bell hooks, Antonio Gramsci, Majid Rahnema, Zakes Mda, Henry Giroux, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Renato Constantino, enriches the reading, drawing on other constructs to set applied theatre and the case studies that follow within wider academic and global contexts.

The chapter on “Playback Theatre in Burundi” by Jonathan Fox is an excellent example of the need for facilitators to be prepared and ready. Fox admits to the many mistakes that were made in the process of using Playback Theatre techniques with a Burundian theatre company. Paradoxically, one of the lessons he learned was the importance of reaching out to people of colour in his work with his own North American community. He also raises other ethical issues when he notes the suspect nature of writing the chapter at all, as few, if any, of his Burundian colleagues would either be able to acquire the book or, should they do so, have the English to read it (244).

To offset Fox’s sensitivity about working as an outsider is the chapter “Decolonizing the Mind,” by the well-known African writer and theatre director, N’gũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who documents his own difficulties in developing and sustaining a theatre company created out of the “authentic language of Kenyan theatre” (266) and hugely appreciated by the communities to which it toured. Success was not, however, appreciated by the government administration that shut down the work and the company, revealing a neo-colonial attitude even within its own culture. Startling is N’gũgĩ’s casual mention of what followed: a year of arrest and confinement without trial in a maximum security prison. Making theatre can be dangerous, but in more ways than perhaps we, in the comfortable wrappings of Western culture, care to contemplate.

Applied theatre work is not easy and the more we read about it, the more we can recognize that there is an immense responsibility in undertaking any of its practices. The need to plan is imperative; the need to revise, rethink, regroup once the plan is being effected is constant. This is process at its most improvisatory—requiring facilitators and project managers who are knowledgeable and responsive, and who possess, as Maxine Greene wrote in 1995, the ability to decen-

tre (31)—to give up a focus on self in order to liberate participants into achieving meaning.

There is so much facilitators need to know, to have experienced, and to be able to recognize, not only about theatre as process and product, rehearsal and performance, but about how that all fits within a socio-economic and cultural context—one with which, in most cases, we are not familiar. Jenny Hughes and Simon Ruding, who interrogate the use of applied theatre with young offenders, suggest seven dispositions for facilitators (221) that is a useful guide. However, it seems to me from reading this collection that for applied theatre to function with any degree of success, facilitators must also have a deep knowledge of the specific field of application, be it with offenders or, for example, the elderly, the marginalized in so-called third world countries, or simply with those in our own local communities.

It was good to read of the work by a number of Canadians: Jan Selman writing with colleagues about using theatre to help young people consider safer sex practices, and Josie Auger and Jane Heather describing their work to inform Aboriginal communities of the issues surrounding HIV. Earlier on, Julie Salverson’s inventive and engaging popular theatre performances with and for young people reminded us once again of the power of laughter in the “deadly game of living” in these times (39).

Anna Herrmann draws a nice distinction between applied theatre and applied drama as she describes her work towards sustainability and transformation with women in the criminal justice system. Her company, Clean Break, uses applied *theatre* to challenge audiences about their perspectives of women and crime and applied *drama* for the personal and creative development of the incarcerated women. And while Herrmann admits that “labels of theatre practice [are] limiting” (329), I would wish that more of my colleagues could appreciate the different purposes of theatre and drama. It took us almost twenty years to make that difference clear to administrators in education, and although I am happy to admit that the boundaries will always be blurry, we do need to be able to communicate simply and cogently the differences between these two applications to those who are meeting them for the first time.

Liselle Terret’s chapter about working with a self-initiated group of learning disabled young people—“Who’s Got the Power?”—reveals the efficacy of applied theatre work. In it we hear, in the actor/participants’ own voices, how change is generated within them through their being in the work and producers of it. What is sad is that their success rebounded when the sponsoring body saw the impact of that work and wanted to use it

as a showcase for the organization rather than as an opportunity for the players to continue to learn and to share their learning with others. The need of funders to exert control—whether early to ensure success or later to capitalize on that success—is an issue for all advocates of applied theatre.

How to separate applied theatre from this reliance on donor funding is the question that Dale Byam poses in "Sanctions and Survival Politics," raising the flag for "community art" that relies on "banked talent" rather than banks (351-52). Michael Etherton, too, addresses this issue in his chapter on "Child Rights Theatre," making the point that "[w]ithin development, *impact* differs from *monitoring and evaluation*" and that long-term impact is dependent upon the continuation of input so that communities become self-seeding (359). Rather than "the pressure to transmit knowledge... efficiently and inexpensively" that Jonathan Fox (243) identifies as the predominant delivery driver in development projects, it is this provision of time that assures effective practice. Only with sufficient time can the "safe spaces" Prentki speaks of in the final chapter, "Applied Theatre in a Global Village," be created: where the unspeakable may be spoken, the unimaginable, imagined "without fear of reprisal or ridicule." Only here, he writes, can "new understandings emerge and new relationships [be] forged" (364). With opportunities to see the world from different points of view, this new way of seeing reaffirms the social nature of humanity and the possibilities for making changes.

The social nature of applied theatre is surely best seen in the participation that is central to its process: within playing groups, audiences, and specific communities whose stories are the resources for performance. To achieve genuine participation is in itself complex and difficult amidst the myriad of agendas, personalities, power relations, and competing ideological interests

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BIO **Juliana Saxton**, PROFESSOR EMERITUS, DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE, UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA, ALSO HOLDS AN ADJUNCT APPOINTMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA. MASTER TEACHER AND INTERNATIONAL SPEAKER, SHE IS CO-AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING *INTO THE STORY: LANGUAGE IN ACTION THROUGH DRAMA* (HEINEMANN, 2004) AND CO-EDITOR OF *APPLIED THEATRE: INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES AND CHALLENGES FOR PRACTICE*, DESIGNED AS A WORKING TEXT FOR STUDENTS AND PRACTITIONERS TO BE PUBLISHED BY INTELLECT BOOKS, FALL 2009.

rife in most projects and settings. Throughout this collection, it is the generosity of the participants that shines through: the bravery to contribute in the face of personal disclosures, the courage to play in the face of political reprisals, the strength to voice what one stands for in the public space—the hunger for the language to talk back.

Not a text that must be read from beginning to end in order to take benefit, this reference reader will enable practitioners, students, and scholars to seek out as they feel appropriate the case studies and commentaries of responsible and authoritative writers—writers who are not afraid to question their own practice and the practice itself. They raise questions that we are (or should be) asking ourselves and initiate questions that, perhaps, we have not yet thought to ask: questions of aesthetics, of ethics, and of assessment—not only as they apply to the practices of applied theatre but as they are embedded within the constraints of funding policies of administrations, institutions, nongovernmental organizations, or governments that are so often the initiators and/or financial support for the work. These issues, too, must be a part of the "civil discourse" to negotiate the differences in aims, ways, and means.

It is clear that there are no recipes for applied theatre practice but "only a constant process of refining and reforming poetics in answer to changing social realities" (Prentki, 21). And here, for those of us who teach and work in this complex, crafty, and creative practice, is the challenge.



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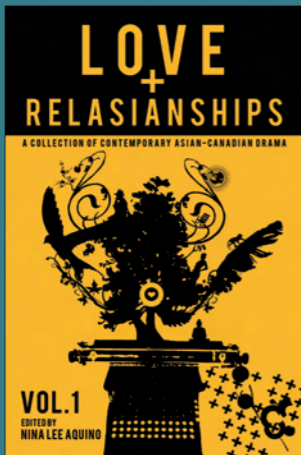
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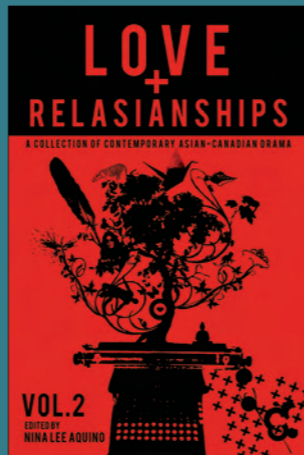


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