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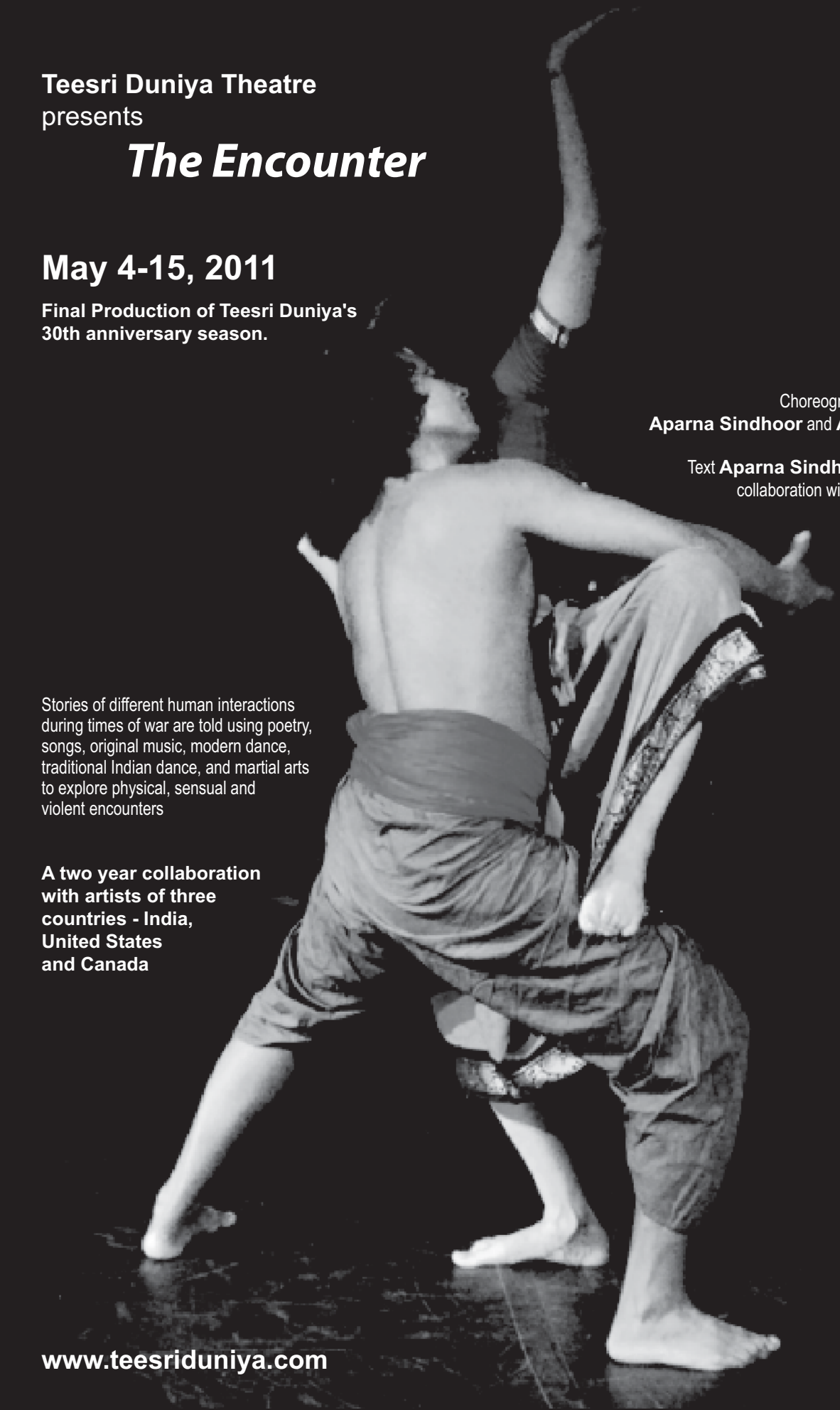

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What's So Funny?

by Edward Little

In 1664, the French playwright Molière wrote and performed Tartuffe, a comedy of manners about a gullible man duped by a self-serving religious hypocrite.

It's a play satirizing human folly—a play about a man so blindly invested in dominant ideology that he remains passionately complicit in the step-by-step ruin of himself, his wife, and his children at the hands of the falsely pious Tartuffe. The Archbishop of Paris was not amused. When King Louis XIV bowed to pressure to censor the play, Molière wrote the *Lettre sur la comédie de l'Imposteur* in defence:

> The comic is the outward and visible form that nature's bounty has attached to everything unreasonable, so that we should see, and avoid, it. To know the comic we must know the rational, of which it denotes the absence and we must see wherein the rational consists [. . .] Incongruity is the heart of the comic [. . .] It follows that all lying, disguise, cheating, dissimulation, all outward show different from the reality, all contradiction in fact between actions that proceed from a single source, all this is in essence comic. ("Molière")

In 2010, the funny times continue. On the economic front, our international banking system is being run as a giant Ponzi scheme—90 percent of the value of the loans banks make are underwritten by less than 10 percent in actual currency holdings. Global stock markets are operated like casinos where investors bet on who will pay their mortgage and who will default, who will eat and who will starve. Auto industry executives fly to Washington in corporate jets to ask for multimillion-dollar bailouts, and giant investment banks use proceeds from the unprecedented $700 billion US government bailout to pay bonuses to their CEOs. The New World Order emanates a funny new world *odour* as corporate profits continue to be privatized, even as "too-big-to-fail" corporate losses are nationalized (see Guppy; *Meltdown*; Finn).

On the environmental front local fishers put out of work by BP's catastrophic Gulf of Mexico oil spill are hired to "cleanup." But before they can deploy their skimming booms, BP sends them elsewhere as clandestine workers move in to sink the oil with toxic chemicals. Government planes fly over, and Presto, Magico! The oil is gone. The autocratic ruler of Dubai—self-described as the CEO of his nation—makes Icarus look like a hopeless underachiever as he flies high above the dire state of his economy to promote investments in air-conditioned streets and refrigerated beaches (see Jamail; *Meltdown*).

In the battle for public opinion, the Alberta Tar Sands spews fear on every side. Environmentalists predict catastrophic destruction while industry and government preach fear of sliding deeper into recession. Catholic school boards in Calgary and Edmonton eliminate the use of funding from casino nights in spite of educators pointing out that this is their only source to pay for Hot Foods programs for undernourished students. Mainstream media tells us the economy is recovering but it is a "jobless recovery"; when this doesn't go down too well in Canada, we miraculously "recover" most of the "lost" jobs—a kind of rhetorical upholstery tacked over low-paying, part-time, insecure, and shitty jobs.

In the Tartuffian "do as I say, not as I do" category, Industry Minister Tony Clement announces that Canada will scrap the mandatory long-form census because it is coercive and an invasion of privacy (many of us suspect that the Government is mostly concerned with its own privacy). Treasury Board President Stockwell (Janus) Day argues that the delay in collecting and reporting census data is "untenable in today's information age." He then proceeds to announce that the Feds will spend $2 billion on prisons in response to an "alarming rise in "unreported crime." Day's sources are later revealed as a *1999 to 2004* Stats Can survey reporting an overall decrease in violent crime, with a modest 3 percent increase in unreported crime mostly related to theft (see Clark; CBC "Crime decreased," "Crime statistics").

A Google search for "Mint"—I was hoping for a better understanding of how this naturally occurring herb might soothe my churning stomach—produces pages and pages of "top hits" relating to the creation of currency.

At times like this, a little dramatic irony goes a long way. It encourages us to imagine the consequences—for both the individual and the state—of actions taken by us and against us. Those familiar with dramatic literature know that when the guards are given a night off or slipped extra rations of wine, trouble is afoot. The silencing of the watchdogs is invariably a portent. It's been a bad year for watchdogs in Canada. In January, the Feds fired our Nuclear Industry Safety watchdog for refusing to

compromise public safety. In July, the head of Stats Can, Munir Sheikh, resigned over the abolishment of the long-form census. August it seemed was the cruelest month. First, the Feds ousted Pat Stogran, the outspoken Ombudsman for Veterans affairs. Stogran had criticized the government for taking a "penny-pinching, insurance-company mentality" towards veterans. The head of the Canadian Firearms Program—a strong supporter of the long-gun registry—was quietly relieved of his duties and sent off for "French-language training." In British Columbia, Chair of the BC Arts Council Jane Danzo resigned over what David Diamond characterized as an "erosion of the sacred principal of arm's length funding" (see CBC "Veterans"; CBC "Federal"; Alliance; Diamond).

One side of Canada's body politic is experiencing something resembling the transformation of the Incredible Hulk. The right arm—the long one used by the law, the military, and the one used to serve our Captains of Industry—has bulked up to smash and grab new funding for prisons, millions in corporate tax cuts, and $15 billion for fighter jets to exercise our sovereignty by flying over the abject poverty and deplorable living conditions of our northern citizens. Meanwhile our left arm—the one used as the measure of "arms-length" to social advocacy organizations such as Rights and Democracy, the Status of Women, the Court Challenges Program, and the Canadian Council on Social Development—is rapidly withering away (see Russell; Dobbin; and CBC "Rights"). In a world increasingly at war over diminishing natural resources and unequal distribution of wealth, we the citizens are being handed very big and very heavy swords and told we don't need shields. Is anyone else nervous?

Ah yes, I confess to a touch of Tartuffian rhetoric myself. Clearly, we are not being handed the weapons—they are being wielded by our governments, our police, our military, and our Captains of Industry. We are not being told that we do not *need* shields or social safety nets, we are being told that we must make them out of the debris of the welfare state scattered around us—and this will make those of us who survive stronger and better entrepreneurs.

Any of you inclined to find good news in all of this might be comforted by the ideological consistency of our government, as they unwaveringly pursue a system of values and beliefs characterized by Ottawa University political scientist Paul Surette as "Canadian post-modern populist conservativism" (Russell). The bad news is that the fundamentalist nature of these values is as toxic to our democratic common good as sub-prime mortgages are to the global financial system.

Unshakeable faith in privatization, international trade agreements, economic incentive programs, and a deregulated free market is accelerating the transfer of our national wealth to a business and banking elite that manages distribution and employment in their best interests. The outdated imperialist belief that the military's job is to defend the economic interests of our business and banking elite abroad perpetrates the worst of colonialism while ignoring the collateral damage of human suffering. The unsubstantiated belief that inequality is a natural consequence of individual free choice transfers the burden of responsibility for social and economic inequities to individuals and private charities. The need to eliminate government "waste" translates as a need to remove funding for anything that challenges or fails to advance the government's ideological values—be it arts, social advocacy, education, or research. A leaner, meaner government sports a "tough on crime" swagger to subdue the inevitable increase in social unrest and property theft borne of desperation.

Our clumsy lumbering right side is crashing through the environment,...

Our clumsy lumbering right side is crashing through the environment, hoarding wealth, creating poverty and suffering, squashing competition in and out of the courts, and bullying the citizenry by threatening to take its *charter* and *our* resources elsewhere if we don't let them continue as team captains. With no authority capable of or willing to stop the big kids from grabbing all the toys and piling on the end of the teeter-totter with the best view, there is clearly no game. In the absence of renewed regulation, the people's side can only draw on knowledge, awareness, critical analysis, and imagination to counterbalance the immense weight of wealth and power. If information is withheld or misrepresented, if education, the arts, and intellectual pursuits are privatized or hobbled to serve corporate values, the fulcrum of democracy is useless.

As Frances Russell points out, Steven Harper is an economist. He clearly recognizes the power of

statistics. Russell contends that Harper is gutting the census precisely in order to remove the statistics that his critics rely on: "Authoritative statistics on the relative social and economic well-being of individual Canadians empower the disempowered to demand government programs (higher taxes on the high income earners) to reduce poverty and disparity and promote upward mobility." Russell points out that Stats Can has already eliminated surveys on financial security; surveys that track job vacancies, benefits, and private pensions; and the longitudinal survey of immigrants to Canada. Perhaps this explains Tony Clement's curious "twitt" in which he claimed to be "the most anti-establishment person I know" (CBC Radio). In Clement's rhetoric "establishment" appears to refer to oppositional government (see also Harper; Stewart; CBC Radio).

In his final column for the *Globe and Mail*, Rick Salutin—another dismissed watchdog—quotes Ramachandra Guha's *India After Gandhi*: "The world over, modern democratic politics has been marked by two rather opposed rhetorical styles. The first appeals to hope, to popular aspirations for economic prosperity and social peace. The second appeals to fear [. . .] about being worsted or swamped by one's historic enemies." Thanks to the Tartuffery borne of the seduction of contemporary politics by global economics, we are well versed in the politics of fear.

One of the places from which we might derive hope is Molière's vision of a theatre that juxtaposes and exposes good and bad, right and wrong, wisdom and folly. UN policy council expert on the Gulf monarchies Christopher Davidson predicts that the watchwords for the next decades will be "transparency, due diligence, and sustainability" (*Meltdown*). For an increasingly media-savvy population, the rhetorical battle is about whose value systems our governments will uphold: public transparency or proprietary capitalism; due diligence extending to the public interest, or due diligence limited to managing economic and legal risk; social, economic, and environmental sustainability, or the sustainability of short-term profit.

Oscar Wilde famously characterized a cynic as a person who knows "the price of everything and the value of nothing." There is ample research demonstrating that the price of an economic system that feeds the rich at the cost of social equality is increased spending on police, prisons, and war. Comedy or tragedy, the theatre has long been a place where we contemplate the *value*—of human life, of human security, of dignity, of our common humanity, and of imagination. For everything else, there's MasterCard!

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Accountability, integrity, and benu:

Accountability, integrity, and ***benu***:

An interview with d'bi.young

by HOLLY LUHNING

© Samuel Lalonde / d'bi.young performs *benu*

Dub poet and storyteller d'bi. young brought her play *benu* to Montreal's Théâtre La Chapelle this past February as part of an international tour. *benu*, along with her plays *blood.claat* and *word! sound! powah!*, is part of her Wombanfesto trilogy. *benu* tells the story of Sekesu, a woman who has recently given birth in a Toronto hospital. The birth triggers a series of physical and mental ailments in Sekesu, which unfold through a biomythographical narrative that parallels the mythology of the Egyptian predecessor to the phoenix—the benu bird. I attended a performance and talkback session (d'bi holds them nightly with her audiences) and had the opportunity to speak with her about *benu* and the development of her work.

Holly: In *benu*, Sekesu's sanity is questioned and/or perhaps compromised by the Toronto hospital to which she's admitted. Is that environment inhospitable, particularly with regard to concerns around birth, and lineage, women, and children?

d'bi: i don't think any place can be inhospitable to life. if we look at those places in the world that are defined as cosmopolitan, they're defined that way because the city is made up of a meeting place of cultures. and whether or not those cultures intersect or overlap is irrelevant for me. the fact that they are there, the fact that they exist, is enough for them to be acknowledged. so that whatever toronto is, i see it from a very specific perspective, as a black, queer, african jamacian, canadian, caribbean mother. a part of my framework—which is an oppression-awareness, intersectional framework—challenges me to acknowledge my privilege in the grand scheme of things, being an able-bodied woman, a working woman, an artist who gets a lot of support for her work, someone who speaks english. so the toronto that i know is so complex in terms of all the people who are there [...] i like feel my responsibility, my accountability is to name a toronto that in fact is quite broad and deep and filled with all kinds of perspectives so that my characters can exist there and engage with themselves, as well as engage with a legacy of colonialism, imperialism, shadeism, classism, racism, ablism, etcetera. any place on the planet that we exist as people has got to be open to dealing with us and all that we come with. because otherwise, i feel like i might continue to play into this idea that some things can't be done here, some things can be done there, when happiness really is as much [...] about environment [as it] is also about the individual, and an individual's own negotiation with self, which is where i'm at right now.

i feel like i've gone full cycle. black nationalist, feminist, deeply insecure about how i look, self-loathingist, i feel like i've run the gamut in terms of trying out all these external ways in which to know myself. i can talk about my society and my social conditioning [. . . ,] but how much room do i have to take to come back to a place of responsibility for my own self-perception? so I think that whether we're talking about toronto, montreal, south africa, jamaica, as an individual I've got to locate myself. there are parts of me that would be hard-pressed to survive in jamaica. there are parts of me that would be hard-pressed to survive in toronto. because that's how complex we are.

Holly: So you focus on an individual choice of how and what you know?

d'bi: yes. for example, everywhere you go, because we've become so violent as a species, violence is everywhere. i'm learning that I've got to create

my safety for my children myself. it's got to be an internal process, as much as an external process.

Holly: It sounds very empowering.

d'bi: it is. i can't change the skin that i came in, how i look, how people name me, box me, i can't really do anything about that. but what I can do is give myself room. that's what I can do. and in doing that, hopefully I'm teaching people how to give me room. and teaching my children how to take up space.

Holly: At the end of the play, we see Sekesu in the courtroom being charged for leaving her child unattended. But we still don't know if her symptoms have been diagnosed, if she's being treated, or how the case will be resolved. Did you intentionally leave that open, and if so, why?

d'bi: i'm first and foremost a dub poet, so i'm a political poet. dub poetry is a political form. sometimes more didactic than other times. i'm not trying to write a didactic play. but i do want to comment on the status of women in society. the status of women in general, the status of black women, more specifically, the status of working class women and what happens to them in the system. the status of single mothers. and so I left it open because i think we have to think about what does happen when we fall through the cracks. who's accountable?

Holly: And about how far she falls?

d'bi: yeah. and who's really responsible? do all of us collectively point our finger at her and say, she is a bad mother? do we each take a bit of responsibility for how we've organized ourselves in this society? i don't know. it's for the audience to decide and not for me to tell them.

Holly: You've written previously about the relationship between violence and anger, and about decisions being made for a community by people who don't live in the community. Is that concept relatable to the hospital system and the legal system making decisions about Sekesu's care when they don't have a comprehensive knowledge of her physiology and life outside the hospital?

d'bi: there's definitely a system, capitalism as a system, in which we function and in which we know ourselves. whether we consider ourselves environmentalists, vegetarians, whatever our ways in which we tell ourselves that we're progressive, it is damn-near impossible to escape the far-reaching tentacles of capitalism. so what does that mean? i don't know. but I figure, for my own self, i've got a responsibility to name how i participate in that capitalism. because i do, i buy the products regardless of where they're made. so when the system intervenes in my life, i really have to question whether or not they are intervening in something they're not already a part of, as a community. i don't want to be hypocritical and say the system comes into my life, or sekesu's life and decides to take her child away, when in fact that relationship has always been there, because we can't escape it. i've fed it and it has fed me. sekesu has fed it and it has fed her, that's what she's known. but there are other systems, like the system of her grandma, at home. the system of her ancestors. but how do we decide to feed those other systems? was there any possibility to seek alternative care? is that something that we can nourish? was there any possibility to have community so that she could have gone to somebody to take care of the baby? i'm trying to make a lot of commentary on how we have structured ourselves as opposed to saying the system is wrong and we are right, or sekesu is right. it's important to locate ourselves within that [system], because we make it work. which goes back to what i was talking about earlier about personal accountability and responsibility. this [system] is what we've created. it's not enough for me to say my ancestors were stolen from africa, which they were. and brought here, which they were. and put to work to create the system with their blood, sweat, and tears, which they were. that's part of the dialogue. other parts of the dialogue include looking at how i now, as the woman i am, participate in the system. so yeah, the system intervenes. we allow it to.

Holly: Your work is monodramatic biomyth. And you've talked about the importance of the elements of myth in that genre. How do you select which elements of myth to infuse with the biographical? Are there certain myths that speak to you more on certain issues? How does that process work?

d'bi: i'm developing this methodology called the *orplusi* principles. orplusi stands for orality, rhythm, political content, language, urgency, sacredness, and integrity. four of those elements were passed down to me by my mother: rhythm, political content, language, and orality—performance, she called it. i grew up watching her and watching other dub poets in jamaica, watching them tell political stories. as i got older, it felt like [storytelling] was part of my responsibility for a number of reasons. my mom had me at fifteen and she really gave up a lot in terms of her art practice to nurture me. i feel that having got all those opportunities, i have an accountability to finish her work. but it's not like i'm doing her a favour. i feel that passionate about it. i've added three others [to her elements]—sacredness, integrity, and urgency—because my own spirit wants to move towards a place of negotiating what it means to be a revolutionary. i'm at a stage now

integrity

where I know now that, for me, love is the ultimate answer. i don't believe anymore in [. . .] violence. it has a lot to do with my children because [. . .] what if somebody harmed them? i can't justify violent revolution, overthrow of the state, because so many people would die. when people die, other people are in pain, because they're their brother or sister or father. i'm having to rethink my entire approach and my new approach has everything to do with those seven principles that i mentioned.

the methodology of biomyth is also developing. biomyth is a term i borrowed from Audre Lorde, who is a radical lesbian feminist poet. her idea of biomyth, it's biographical material heavily mythologized. i borrow that idea because if i want to write my own truth, but i don't want to necessarily write exactly how it is, then that makes sense. and I thought if I want to write about magic, then how do I do that? mythology is everything enchanting. all the potential for change that resides in magic excites me. and then monodrama: solo shows gives me the most control over my art! (laughs) also, it can be challenging saying other people's words, when if what they're saying is not what you believe. or if the whole picture doesn't come down to a philosophy that you endorse. that for me is like doing an ad campaign for a credit card company. so, I feel all my methodology boils down to, or can be instilled into, the idea of integrity. integrity has to hold it all together. that is simpler when I'm doing my own work, that is simpler in that biomyth, monodramatic place.

in terms of the actual myths, i spend a lot of time reading about and listening to people tell stories about mythologies from all around the world. i'm really interested in these ideas of cycles and the womb and birth and blood, these themes that keep popping up, and abandonment, and really interested in getting to a place in terms of planting, growing, and healing. all of that together may seem like quite a big and broad thing, but in my own body it all just comes down to integrity. if I have integrity i want to eat properly, i don't want to destroy the land, i want to treat the people around me with love, i want to treat my children with love, i want to write and create the best work.

Holly: With regard to the body: you've written that it is a site of expression, pleasure, and resistance. Can you talk about how you're able to express concerns about identity and power through the canvas of the body on stage, both through the content of *benu* and through your physical performance of character and story on stage?

d'bi: i'm a survivor of incest. i feel it has something to do with something to do with how i live in my body. my body was sexualized very, very early. and some of what i remember was pleasurable, and much of it was without my consent. it's a weird, fucked-up place to feel pleasure when you're not consenting. for some of us it takes us away from our bodies, and for others of us it takes us deeper into our bodies. i'm the latter. my way of knowing the world is very visceral. i feel like i'm a sensual being and the place for rhythm feels like it's at the very nucleus of who I am. the performance you saw last night was the first performance where i went that far, with that [play's] rhythm. that was not staged. that was simply me feeling secure enough to go that far. and that's what being on stage is for me. it's the place to explore and experience being in my body. each night I tell the story, i am deeper and deeper into my body. each night, each show is very different, i'm in a different place, the audience is different, and i'm learning and it's really a process of change and transformation for me. that change, that visceral, physical retention of memory, it unfolds, it blossoms and opens like a flower each time i go on stage. i'm in love with the stage. it's such a fascinating, magical place, and i'm constantly surprised. [in *benu*] the scene with the bird, the way I wrote it: sekesu gets arrested, she breaks down, next scene. and last night what happened? she got arrested and she refused to break down in the way that i wrote her. i was looking at her as a playwright going, i'm not sure what you're doing but that's not what i wrote. you're supposed to be crying. and sekesu refused to cry, my eyes were dry, dry, dry, there were no tears, no tears welling up in my belly. and as the storyteller, you have to honour the moment. and so i continued and what emerged was the bird. she appeared and she did her thing and i could see my shadow on the ground, so i could see what was happening. i was like "whoa!" and so my relationship to my body as a medium and a conduit of energy is one that i'm learning about, but it's becoming clearer and clearer to me that that's a part of what i do on stage. i don't understand it intellectually, i only know what i witness and what i feel and what people tell me they see is that there is some sort of conducting, electrical conducting that is happening, and i'm playing a medium of some sort.

Holly: In having a talkback session at the end of each performance, your work seems to continually evolve on and around the stage. What are the possibilities that exist because you're involved in a process rather than solely aiming toward a static end-product?

d'bi: i feel like i'm working on product and process simultaneously. and i mention product because i am very, very, interested in product. i'm interested in product because when you look at the end result of an accumulation of energy, you can use that end result to access where to go from next. so product is very important in terms of marking one's journey and one's growth. process is also integral be-

that changes that visceral, physical retention of memory, it unfolds, it blossoms and opens like a flower each time i go on stage. i'm in love with the stage, it's such a fascinating, magical place and i'm constantly surprised.

Accountability

cause the product is not the be-all and end-all of the entire process. the product at one stage marks the product at that stage, and then the product at another stage marks the product of that stage, and then that product at another stage [. . .] and in that you can see cycles. so that in talkback sessions, people are able to relate to what they see on stage and let me know what they feel is working, what they have questions about, what they really felt emotionally connected to, what they didn't feel so emotionally connected to, and in listening to their dialogue, i can then go back to my process and re-evaluate what to do. while, if i were going on some other ways that theatre is created here in north america, you work and you create and you do process and you end up with a product that is unchanging, with an aim to end up with the perfect product that is unmanipulatable, that is untouchable, and that exists in some sort of make-believe, pristine place of perfection. i'm not really concerned with that. my work is always evolving, so whether we call it a world premiere, whether we call it a workshop, it's always a work in process to me. i always reserve the right to go back to a piece and tweak it in the ways that i've grown and changed.

Holly: You've mentioned in other interviews that you're interested in food and food energy. How do you see the tamarind balls in *benu*? They seem to be a magical experience of sensuality and taste, and they also function as a connection between grandmother and girl.

d'bi: food is such a big deal. food is sensual, sexual, erotic. food is tied to so many of our childhood memories. food represents for me so much of what i remember of jamaica. if you look at all our cultures, it's food that you congregate around. Will Tuttle, he wrote a book called *World Peace Diet*, talking about food energy [. . . about how] we have what are like plantations, enslaved animals. and then we kill them and then we eat them. we do that. and when he broke it down like that i really had to look at myself and say, you absolutely know what it feels like to be a slave master. because you are one. you know what it feels like to be a murderer, because you are one. i remember that feeling when i had to admit that to myself, because i don't feel like a wicked person. but i had to admit to myself that i in fact am. when i was saying that i'm into food, i'm actually into that thing called integrity. the food thing cannot be ignored. it's the biggest thing. and looking at a tamarind ball, i'm getting the opportunity to look at the beauty and sensuality of a food that doesn't involve killing other beings. in that scene where the woman takes the tamarind ball and there's this elaborate ritual where she's making the tamarind ball, sharing the tamarind ball and then she eats the tamarind ball, that for me represents the ability for me to participate in things that are ritual and sensual and fun and that don't involve killing. i'm just beginning to understand how implicated I am in this mess.

Holly: Which again leads back to the concept of personal accountability.

d'bi: our sense of accountability can't be about pointing fingers. it has to be about you looking at yourself. otherwise you could sit down and point fingers all day long. nothing gets changed.

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Holly: You're on a global tour—how do you anticipate that's going to change you as a performer or storyteller through the different discussions and the different evolutions of your work that may happen?

d'bi: i have no idea! i don't know. you know what this tour is doing for me, it's giving me uninterrupted time with my children.

Holly: Are they going everywhere with you?

d'bi: yeah, it's crazy. i get to home-school my five year old. i get to teach him how to read. and I get to spend time with them together and separate and that's the most exciting thing about the tour—we're on the road together. i'm very very excited to be meeting people and all the discussions we'll have and it will be great to see how they interact with the work, but ultimately i think that it's connected to what is going on with me and my boys. they're not separate things. every night we end up talking about cycles and parenting in the talkback. and every night i'm left with the reality that i am at the end of the day somebody's mom. that's the biggest responsibility that i have. but that energy influences everything else. writing plays is a bit of mothering i think, having talkbacks is a bit of mothering. whether or not you have children, deciding that you want to take care of the planet and care of yourself is mothering. so it's all one, it's all the same. it all comes back down to the same. love. integrity.

BIOS

d'bi.young IS AN AWARD-WINNING AFRICAN JAMAICAN DUB POET, MONODRAMATIST, AND EDUCATOR. ONE OF NORTH AMERICA'S MOST CELEBRATED STORYTELLERS, SHE HAS CREATED SIX ALBUMS, PUBLISHED THREE BOOKS, PRODUCED SIX PLAYS, AND TOURED AND LECTURED NATIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. SHE PERFORMED IN *LORD HAVE MERCY!*, CANADA'S FIRST MULTI-ETHNIC SITCOM, AND IN TREY ANTHONY'S *DA KINK IN MY HAIR*, AND SHE FOUNDED ANITAFRIKA DUB THEATRE.

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Town Hall on Cultural Pluralism in Performing Arts

by charles c. smith

On January 29 and 30, 2010, Cultural Pluralism in Performing Arts Movement Ontario (CPPAMO) convened its first Town Hall. This event, held on the Scarborough Campus of the University of Toronto, included dynamic dance performances and an astounding panel of individuals engaged in promoting pluralism in dance, music, and community-based arts. The Town Hall was chaired by Sara Diamond, President of the Ontario College of Art and Design, who delivered the keynote address, and by Kathleen Sharpe, President of the Canadian Conference for the Arts and Executive Director of Ontario Cultural Attractions Fund.

CPPAMO is a movement of Aboriginal and ethno-racial artists working with presenters to empower the performing arts communities of Ontario. Its supporters include representatives of Sampradaya Dance, Nathaniel Dett Chorale, Little Pear Garden Theatre Collective, Centre for Indigenous Theatre, Sparrow in the Room, fu-Gen Asian Theatre, b current, Why Not Theatre, urban arts, backforward collective, Culture Days, members of Canada Council Stand Firm, Obsidian Theatre, the Collective of Black Artists, CanAsian Dance, and Teya Peya Productions.

CPPAMO is working with Community Cultural Impresarios (CCI) and its members to build an understanding of pluralism in performing arts in order to encourage CCI and its members to engage performers from Aboriginal and ethno-racial communities—and, thereby, give audiences across Ontario the chance to see artistic expressions from diverse communities on a regular basis. For this Town Hall, CPPAMO worked closely with representatives of Markham Theatre, Oakville Theatre, and Rose Theatre (Brampton).

The Town Hall opened with a solo dance performance by Kevin Ormsby of Kashedance. Kevin's artistic vision of humanity is expressed through kinetic movement, spirituality, and rhythmic vitality. Using a technically versatile emerging dance technique called "*kashedantek*," he fused movements of traditional and modern dance with ballet to create a contemporary synthesis. Kevin's style is explosive, subtle, confronting, virtuosic, and passionate, combining the historic traditions of Africa and the Caribbean in its representation of diasporic Canadian society. Kashedance is the only company of its kind in Toronto's history to be formed and directed by a Jamaican-Canadian. By presenting dance as art through a mixture of the traditional and contemporary, the company gives voice to the realities of diasporic people in a multifaceted Canadian society.

An exciting panel of speakers followed the dance performance. Ajay Heble, Artistic Director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, spoke about improvisation and hybridity in the development of contemporary improvised music. He also discussed the critical need to look to marginalized communities for new forms of artistic expression. The Guelph Jazz Festival honours the pioneering work of peoples of African descent who created this art form, which is now known around the world. As well, Ajay talked about working with communities to build audiences and to introduce the complexity of jazz through story and workshops.

Santee Smith of Kaha:wi Dance discussed her journey as an Aboriginal woman in the contemporary dance world. She spoke of the influence of traditional Aboriginal dance, ballet, and contemporary dance on her work—describing how these three form points of arrival and departure for her company's creations. In her discussion, Santee expressed concern that many seem to think she would offer more traditional Aboriginal dance, and she stressed the importance for Aboriginal dancers/artists to break down stereotypes of who they are and their forms of expression. She pointed out that Aboriginal dancers/artists are engaged in today's world and that they bring their traditions with them as they learn, absorb, and integrate other forms into contemporary expressions.

Artistic Director of the Canada Dance Festival Brian Webb addressed the challenges to the CDF's aim to stage excellence in contemporary dance and to integrate dance forms from Aboriginal and racialized peoples into the Canadian palate for dance. Brian spoke in depth about the CDF conference of 2009, which focused on diversity in dance and featured panel presentations, workshops, and dance performances on this theme. He discussed the need for dancers and dance curators to be daring in creativity and to be open to and understanding of the diversity of vocabularies in the dance world. He sees this as an opportunity for dance practitioners to develop curatorial competence and go beyond regarding Eurocentric art forms as universal and of the best quality.

Tim Whalley, Executive Director of the Scarborough Arts Council, introduced his organization's work with local groups in high-needs areas and immigrant communities. He spoke of the Arts Council's new project to engage members of these communities and to actively support their involvement in the local Scarborough arts scene as a way to increase audiences and to understand and support the diversity of artistic expressions coming from these communities.

The second day of the Town Hall opened with Sara Diamond's keynote address. Sara is an accomplished artist who has worked in video, television, photography, and fabric. Her works are in collections as diverse as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the National Gallery of Canada, and the Museo des Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires. From the 1970s to 1995 she led the Women's Labour History Project, producing documentary and experimental videos, photography, and texts that represented the history of working women in British Columbia. She received the Bell Canada Award for excellence in video, the Simon Fraser University Gold Medal for History, and other diverse awards, such as the Woman of Vision Award. While Sara was Artistic Director of

HE DISCUSSED THE NEED FOR DANCERS AND DANCE CURATORS TO BE DARING ...

Media and Visual Art and Director of Research at the prestigious Banff Centre, she created the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI) in 1995 and led it until 2005. She currently serves on the Ontario Ministry of Culture's Minister's Advisory Council on Arts & Culture and the Board of Directors of the Toronto Arts Council Foundation.

As president of OCAD, Sara spoke of her intent to engage Aboriginal and racialized communities as artists, students, educators, volunteers, and board members. She addressed the critical issue of leadership and the challenges of working to ensure that OCAD, as a contemporary arts institution, engages deeply in the visioning and work of pluralism. She acknowledged the difficulties of moving a learning institution in such a direction and the many challenges presented by faculty, board members, and students. But she also pointed out the benefits of engaging in and enabling organizational change and of seeing new faces, bodies, identities, and cultural forms of expression emerge in institutions. For Sara, this is all part of transforming OCAD so that it becomes the "university of the imagination."

Sara's keynote presentation was followed by a remarkable dance performance of the Sampradaya Dance Creations. Sampradaya is a dynamic award-winning Toronto-based Canadian dance company recognized internationally for forging new paradigms in Canada's dance milieu. The company was founded in 1990 by Artistic Director Lata Pada. Equally acclaimed for her excellence in *bharatanatyam*, Lata is the creative force behind the company and has recently been conferred the Order of Canada, becoming the first South Asian artist to be honoured by this prestigious award. Sampradaya is committed to showcasing *bharatanatyam* as a world art form, as it explores diverse movement styles, contemporary themes, and innovative dance creations. Sampradaya sees dance as a mirror to society, inspired and rooted in the expression of human experience. The company explores dance as an engaging and enriching element in the lives of its collaborators and viewers.

For this Town Hall, Sampradaya showcased its recent collaborative project, *Samvad*, which means, "anything spoken in true spirit and right earnestness leads to a samvad or dialogue taking place between two or more learned people." *Samvad* is brilliantly performed by Nadine Jackson, Meena Murugesan, and Shelley Ann McLeod, women of African, South Asian, and Aboriginal descent respectively. They explore issues of identity in Canada today relating to gender, violence against women, self-empowerment, racism, and self-determination.

The dance draws both on contemporary expression and on traditional dance forms of the Aboriginal, South Asian, and African diasporas. The dancers are at times playful, at times hostile toward each other; at other moments, they express through words and movement, the difficulties of their own bodies—that is, that they are racialized, gendered, and unwanted in Canadian society. The sadness, pain, and anger in their movements and words are quite remarkable, with many iconic images crossing the stage through solo acts, duets, and collectives. *Samvad* was accompanied by live music and spoken word provided by N'dere Nimon Headley-Lindsay, Santosh Naidu, and Meredith Zwicker. The performers were mentored by Lata Pada, renowned Aboriginal dancer/actor Michael Greyeyes, and co-founder of the Collective of Black Artists, Charmaine Headley.

To round out the Town Hall, small group workshops were held to discuss the themes of pluralism in terms of curatorial/cultural competence, diversity in performances, audience development, employment in performing venues, relationship with funders, and board representation and development. Participants discussed key issues in each of these areas and made recommendations. A final report on the Town Hall will be released soon.

BIO

charles c. smith, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF CPPAMO, IS A LECTURER ON CULTURAL PLURALISM IN THE ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, AS WELL AS A PUBLISHED POET, AWARD-WINNING PLAYWRIGHT, AND ESSAYIST. ALONG WITH HIS FIRST BOOK OF POETRY, *PARTIAL LIVES*, CHARLES HAS PUBLISHED WORK IN SUCH JOURNALS AS *POETRY CANADA REVIEW*, THE *QUILL & QUIRE*, AND *DESCANT*. HE RECENTLY RECEIVED A GRANT FROM THE ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL'S WRITERS RESERVE GRANTS PROGRAM, AND IS WORKING ON A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERFORMANCE PIECE BASED ON HIS POETRY, WHICH IS BEING PRODUCED BY WIND IN THE LEAVES COLLECTIVE.

Universality and Difference: The Politics of Peter Brook's 11 and 12

by Emer O'Toole

Simply staged on a sand-dusted orange carpet, *11 and 12*[1] is typical of Peter Brook's late style. The international cast includes European, African, Middle Eastern, and American performers who play Malian and French roles with no attempt to disguise their skin colours or accents. Sparse wooden trees on casters are wheeled about to create a sense of place, and small star-shaped logs provide stools on which characters can sit to reflect and talk. At one point, a square of red cloth is bunched at each end and held between two men to become a softly swaying boat; at another, a single mahogany chair represents French colonial power. Sitting serenely amid cushions stage right, Toshi Tsuchitori provides unobtrusive and atmospheric music that complements the slowly unfolding action. Brook has attempted to transform the imposing stage of The Barbican theatre into a meditative space.

11 and 12 is an adaptation by Marie-Hélène Estienne of Malian writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ's autobiographical book, *Vie et Enseignement de Tierno Bokar, Le Sage de Bandiagara.* Set in French colonial Mali in the 1930s and 40s, the production tells the story of a violent religious dispute that erupts over whether a particular Sufi prayer should be recited eleven or twelve times. The French administration unwisely becomes involved, reckoning those who say the prayer eleven times to be anti-imperialist subversives. Tierno Bokar, a Sufi mystic and the spiritual guru of Hampâté Bâ, privileges religious commitment over clan loyalty and meets with rival cleric Cherif Hamallah to discuss the dispute and come closer to the religious truth of the matter.

The different accents and races of the actors take getting used to. One has to process the idea that Palestinian actor Makram J. Khoury is supposed to be Malian Bokar. But when the stage conventions have been clearly established, it is easy to suspend disbelief, see past how an actor looks and sounds, and perceive a character only. Brook's commitment to this mode of representation comes from his belief in a third culture, the culture of links, which he situates somewhere between the culture of the state and that of the individual (Brook 63). In workshops with international actors, Brook found that "popular clichés about each person's culture were often shared by the person himself" (66). What actors took to be their culture was only the superficial mannerism of that culture; something very different reflected their deepest culture and individuality.

However, Brook reminds us that "if official culture is suspect, it is necessary to look equally critically at the culture which, reacting against the inadequate forms of expression of embryonic states, strives to put individualism in its place" (64). The culture of links, which is neither statist nor individualist, discovers relationships and "vital truths" (66) through cultural acts. While these relationships often take the form of archetypes, they are not to be understood in the Jungian sense, but rather, David Williams explains, as "transcultural paradigms for exploring present absences and possible futures" (68). Brook's international ensemble represents much more than a commitment to colour-blind casting. The audience is obliged to read the actors as individual performers rather than as racial metaphors or cultural representatives (73). Or, more simply, the audience is prevented from Othering the actors.

Playing within a number of socio-political contexts—unrest in the Parisian banlieues, British distrust of Islam, and the global "war on terror" led by the U.S.—*11 and 12* presents an opportunity for its Western middle-class audience to discover the universal connections, the "vital truths," that exist between them and that most terrifying twenty-first-century Other: the Muslim religious leader. Tierno Bokar represents an archetype all can recognize: a wise old man, gentle and deeply faithful. He is a spiritual leader who rejects politics, calling for tolerance and peace. The socio-political implications of this characterization did not go unremarked in the British press. Reviewing for *The Telegraph*, Charles Spencer says,

> The problem is that Brook is preaching to the converted. Lessons about love, peace and tolerance go down very well among the bien pensants in the Barbican. But they are not being delivered to those Muslims who believe that it is their duty to strap explosives to their bodies to blow up their enemies. What we need at present is plays that get inside the minds of today's jihadists, not a cosy history and philosophy lecture set more than 60 years ago.

© Tim Mitchell / from l. to r. Tunji Lucas & Makram J. Khoury / Makram J. Khoury & Khalifa Natour / Tunji Lucas

One might counter, of course, that the taxes of the "converted" pay soldiers who believe it is their duty to destroy Afghani farmers' poppy fields or to bomb the homes of Iraqi civilians. Both Christians and Muslims perpetrate acts of violence in the name of higher causes, and it is emphatically not the case that a Barbican audience has nothing to learn about tolerance and understanding. Indeed, if the critical reception of *11 and 12* teaches us anything, it is that the Western audiences found it difficult to interpret this play outside of their own cultural frames of reference. Brook's attempt to stop us Othering the Other is perhaps too successful; an emphasis on finding universal cultural links can blind an audience to difference.

Two reviewers (Leo Benedictus, Ruth Morse) compare the religious dispute over the single prayer, represented by a single prayer bead, to the Lilliputian dispute in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* over the correct way to crack an egg. Swift's clever satire of the political motivations behind the changing religious affiliations of the British crown in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries highlights the often pragmatic nature of professed religious belief. In reducing the dispute in *11 and 12* to such a metaphor, however, I believe that something essential to the theme of the story is trivialized. Many other reviewers (e.g., Paul Taylor, Karen Fricker) see Bokar's decision to adopt the eleven prayers of the rival clan as a political move, albeit a spiritually motivated one, designed to create peace between the two religious factions.

I find this surprising, as the scene in which Tierno Bokar meets Cherif Hamallah to discuss the dispute offers very little to suggest that Bokar adopts the eleven prayers to heal the rift. Rather, Bokar seems to recognize in Hamallah a spiritual power greater than his own. Bokar is a man who hopes, at his death, to have more enemies to whom he has done nothing than friends. He is a man who refuses to serve France not because he reviles

Both Christians and Muslims perpetrate acts of violence in the name of higher causes, and it is emphatically not the case that a Barbican audience has nothing to learn about tolerance and understanding.

imperialism (indeed, he encourages Hampâté Bâ to attend French school), but because a man cannot serve two masters, and his master is God. Bokar chooses the way of eleven not to bring an end to the dispute, but because he recognizes in Hamallah a mystic who, although younger in years than he, is older in spirit. He does not act politically, but in pursuit of religious truth. As David Kornhaber astutely remarks in praise of *Tierno Bokar*, an earlier version of the *11 and 12*, "it is something of a marvel to see Islam depicted as a religion that inspires not only violent martyrdom or fundamentalist politics, but deep moments of wholly apolitical, intensely spiritual introspection" (30). Indeed, this is *11 and 12*'s great strength.

Brook, in an interview with Paul Taylor, remarks that "the English, of course, have a terror of mysticism even though Shakespeare is drenched with it very deeply and with a sense of something that we can't name" (Taylor). Perhaps it is because of this terror that it is difficult for a London audience to imagine that the peaceful and wise Bokar, his archetype comfortingly recognizable, could regard the question of whether the prayer should be said eleven or twelve times as anything other than arbitrary. Surely he sees, as we do, that this point of doctrine is, in practical terms, of as little importance as the cracking of an egg?

Such a supposition points to one of the limitations of Brook's culture of links. To become immersed in a third culture, national and individual differences must be sidelined. When these national and individual differences reassert themselves, the tenuous culture of links is broken. The Otherness encapsulated in Bokar's persuasion that Hamallah is closer to God than he himself is propelled me out of the world inhabited by raceless, accentless, nationless characters. If I admitted Bokar's difference, the story became trapped in an Other reality, populated by Other people who seemed exotic and strange. If I failed to admit

Bokar's difference, reducing his actions to a logic congruent with my own, then I bowdlerized this story, appropriating it to make it say what I wanted it to say.

I chose to admit the difference of the characters, and thus the actors, on stage. I saw their skin colours, heard their accents, and became aware of their physical and cultural differences from me, from one another, and from the characters they portrayed. When I did so, another critique of Brook's reluctance to engage with difference occurred to me. Why should all seven actors be male? In casting this production, Brook attempts to transcend skin colour, nationality, ethnicity, accent, and, in some cases, age—but not gender. Is gender a physical marker of difference that Brook regards as fixed, or one that is not important to destabilize? The two representations of female characters in this play, "a comic anxious mother and a shrewish widow" (Morse), are delivered in a caricatured and derogatory manner by pouting or shrieking male actors. There is a tense relationship between Brook's universalism and sexual difference, and there are times in *11 and 12* when female absence speaks louder than male presence.

A theme that is, in contrast, tangible throughout is colonialism. The French administrators are almost uniformly portrayed as cruel, intolerant, and stupid, juxtaposing, to borrow a phrase from Robert Stam and Louise Spence, "patronisingly positive" (3) portrayals of the African characters. The play's politics, Karen Fricker remarks, "feel basic and dated. Playing nearly all the French characters as authoritarian buffoons is not the subtlest way to make an anti-colonial critique." French involvement in the dispute exacerbates tensions; the administration fails to engage with the spiritual dimension of the situation, seeing political subversion where there is religious difference. It imprisons and exiles Cherif Hamallah for his beliefs, and even, it is suggested, has him tortured.

The way colonialism is dealt with here led me to compare *11 and 12* to Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, which played at the National Theatre, London in May 2009. In Soyinka's postcolonial work, well-meaning but misguided English colonists interfere with the cultural and spiritual affairs of a Yoruba community. When the Yoruba king dies, the English try to prevent the ritual suicide of Elesin, the king's horseman, whose spirit, the people believe, must guide the dead king to the afterlife. Soyinka's work illuminates the rift between empiricist and spiritual ways of viewing the world, but without suggesting an equality between them. In his preface to the play, Soyinka warns that reading the play as a "'clash of cultures'" is reductionist insofar as it "presupposes a potential equality *in every given situation* of the alien culture and the indigenous, on the actual soil of the latter" (5). Yet Soyinka's District Officer is no stupid, cruel caricature, but a man so wrapped up in his empiricist reality he cannot see that his truth is not the only truth. Similarly, Elesin is not simply a wise benevolent man, committed to his spiritual tradition, but a human being who loves the pleasures of the flesh and struggles with his duty.

In Brook's *11 and 12* the relationship between colonizer and colonized—or as Soyinka would have it, between alien and indigenous—is less layered and intricate. The French are, as mentioned, brutish and intolerant men, with one or two laughably ardent and nationalistic exceptions, including an enthusiastic teacher who cries with emotion at hearing France's Malian citizens sing the Marseillaise. In the presence of the colonizers, the Africans become what Homi K. Bhabha would call mimic men; in seeming to accept French culture they ambivalently suggest "that the fetishised colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal" (129). On finishing school, Hampâté Bâ gets a job as a clerk in the French administration. In direct address to the audience he recalls with contempt how, in response to the disrespect of French officers, the words "yes commandant sir" fell from his lips like "urine from a weak bladder." The inner rebellion that these words of mimicry mask is made plain. Like Bhabha's hypothetical receiver of the Bible (131), Hampâté Bâ appears to receive the structures of the colonial system gladly in order to put them to his own use.

There is a tense relationship between Brook's universalism and sexual difference, and there are times in 11 and 12 *when female absence speaks louder than male presence.*

But there is something amiss in this portrayal of resolute, peaceful, and good Malians silently resisting the French colonizers. Stam and Spence remind us that an insistence on positive images might obscure "the fact that 'nice' images might at times be as pernicious as overtly degrading ones, providing a bourgeois façade for paternalism, a more pervasive racism" (3). This African story has been adapted by a Frenchwoman and staged by a famous English director, and this fact cannot be ignored when thinking through the politics of the production. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's formulation, "imperialism continues to control the economy, politics and cultures of Africa [. . . while] pitted against it are the ceaseless struggles of African people to liberate their economy, politics, and culture from that Euro-American-based stranglehold [. . . and . . .] to seize back their creative initiative in history through a real control of all the means of communal self-definition in time and space" (143).

How, if at all, does this staging of Hampâté Bâ's tale of religious freedom in colonial Mali contribute to Africa's postcolonial struggle? Speaking of the evolution of postcolonial African literature, wa Thiong'o celebrates that "instead of seeing Africa as one undifferentiated mass of historically wronged blackness, it now attempted some sort of class analysis and evaluation of neo-colonial societies" (158). In this regard, *11 and 12* represents a step backwards. It presents African Sufism as an indigenous religion, never problematizing the fact that Islamic society was itself the result of previous colonization. Further, the only power relations discernible in the piece are between colonizer and colonized. There is no hint, for example, that Hampâté Bâ comes from an aristocratic Fula family in Bandiagara. In short, this African story is filtered through Brook's Western eye and remains firmly within the "Euro-American-based stranglehold" wa Thiong'o resists. The Barbican audience has come to see Peter Brook's universalism, not Amadou Hampâté Bâ's Mali.

Brook's third culture is incommensurable with the struggle that wa Thiong'o deems necessary for Africa. Where intellectuals like Frantz Fanon embark on a passionate search for pre-colonial African cultures with the aim of celebrating "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and kept itself in existence" (155), Brook asks his audience to sidestep difference and find instead the truths that exist between cultures. While this play stages colonialism, it is not a post-colonial play. The cultural specificities of Hampâté Bâ's story have been obscured by the universalism of the staging. What is left is a quiet and meditative piece about spiritual faith. Brook creates a mythical world of archetype in which the villains are the villains and the heroes the heroes. If Spencer dubiously decries the play for preaching tolerance to a tolerant converted, Kate Kellaway, writing for *The Observer*, notes with more subtlety, "[*11 and 12*] makes its enlightened points so uncontroversially that it is hard to imagine anyone leaving the theatre with an argument on their lips." Indeed the greatest point of contention raised by *11 and 12* seems to be that, even while dealing with issues urgently relevant to our time, the play offers the audience so little that is contentious. The case of Islam and Africa has been benevolently pleaded by an Englishman, and the message remains black and white.

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Abdou Ouologuem, Jared McNeill & Maximilien Seweryn

In short, this African story is filtered through Brook's Western eye and remains firmly within the "Euro-American-based stranglehold" wa Thiong'o resists.

NOTES

[1] Performed at The Barbican, London. February 2010.

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BIO

Emer O'Toole IS A PHD CANDIDATE AT ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, RESEARCHING THE ETHICS OF COLLABORATION, IN PARTICULAR, RIGHTS OF REPRESENTATION IN INTERCULTURAL THEATRE PRACTICE. SHE TEACHES CRITICAL THEORIES AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE-MAKING, AND LECTURES ON PIERRE BOURDIEU, PHENOMENOLOGY, AND POSTCOLONIALISM. SHE IS CURRENTLY A HEAD EDITOR OF *PLATFORM*, ROYAL HOLLOWAY'S POST-GRADUATE JOURNAL OF THEATRE AND THE PERFORMING ARTS.

Forging Community and Transnational Identity: ETI! EAST AFRICA SPEAKS! JULY 2008

BY JESSICA M. BROWN-VÉLEZ

The audience sits on three raked sides of an open playing area in a black-box space, dimly lit. A large screen upstage will show images and supertitles. A plain, wooden bench stage right awaits musicians. We hear singing, drums, bare feet moving in time on the cool black linoleum. An actor in cotton pants and plain shirt, musicians with drum and zeze, a dancer with long skirt and bells on her ankles: we half-see, half-sense as they enter. The procession winds its way into and through the stage area. The musicians take their places at the side. An actor steps forward into the light and begins.

I witnessed this collaboratively created performance of *Mtumishi wa Umma/Public Servant*, performed by Tanzanian troupe Parapanda Theatre Lab, at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center in City University of New York's (CUNY) Graduate Center on July 21, 2008. The presentation was part of an ambitious project called Eti! East Africa Speaks! organized by Laura Edmondson of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire; Roberta Levitow, founder of the online international community for theatre exchange, *Theatre Without Borders*; and Ugandan playwright Charles Mulekwa.[1] Entailing a two-week residency at Dartmouth followed by five days in New York, this project brought East African theatre artists together with students, scholars, and activists from a range of backgrounds in environments committed to creative collaboration.

The project's organizers hoped to bring together artists from all of the East African countries. As it happened, however, no Burundian artists participated, but Robert O. Ajwang', Andrea Kalima, and members of the Dar es Salaam-based Parapanda Theatre Lab (Eva David Nyambe, Mgunga Mwa Mnyenyelwa, and Mrisho Mpoto) strongly represented Tanzania. Kenyan artist Mũmbi Kaigwa and Rwandan artist Hope Azeda joined with Ugandan artists (Deborah Asiimwe, Okello Kelo Sam, George Bwanika Seremba, and Charles Mulekwa). This intensive series of events, conversations, and exhibitions was part of an ongoing effort to begin the work of creating a new artistic community joined across national and continental boundaries—between one East African country and another, and between those countries and the U.S.—to support a "burgeoning transnational East African identity" (Edmondson "Re: Eti!").

This is not transnational*ism* as state of being or ideology, nor do I mean a code word for U.S. imperialism. Rather, I perceive these individuals and their movements as part of transnational processes, highlighting the complexity of the nation-state and culture's construction in the globalized and post/neo-colonial world. As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan do, I "use the term 'transnational' to problematize a purely locational politics of global-local or center-periphery in favor of [. . .] the lines cutting across them" (Grewal and Kaplan 13): the convergence of individuals rather than cooperation between national governments. In moving along those lines we may discover that, as Stuart Hall describes, marginal space has its own particular sort of power, especially as the marginal is increasingly the province of the new and innovative (34). Hall talks of the most "creatively emergent" art as issuing from marginal spaces that stand counter to the discourses of dominant regimes. I see this project as an exercise in the idea that as margins collide with centres, as we traverse the lines that cut across such constructions, the inhabitants of this variety of spaces might find new meaning together in the in-between space while collaborating to perform one another's works and sharing them with a larger community.

It would be reductive to suggest that a single project, however ambitious, could incorporate the entirety of East Africa's diverse cultures, societies, and nations. Yet we must, in a globally connected world, question the very sufficiency of those identities—cultural, social, national—to fully define us. As Jahan Ramazani has recently explored, the multiplicity of globally connected identities makes nationalities and monocultures insufficient categories for interacting in the totality of modern experience: they are a start, but not all there is. The connections among and between identities—in a global environment that begins to suggest the inevitability of such bonds through media, travel, and the ways cultures now borrow from one another and merge—present themselves for interrogation through the kind of questioning, challenging theatre Eti! meant to promote.

RESIDENCY

On July 1, 2008, the group of eleven theatre and performance practitioners gathered with scholars and students from the U.S. at Dartmouth College. Their aim was to create and refine performance works that explored memory, both personal and shared, and questioned the political and social realities—corruption, public health, family, tradition—present in their respective nations and throughout East Africa. Workshops on resume writing, performance practices, and playwriting intersected with film screenings, rehearsals, readings, and discussions. A summer film series on Dartmouth's campus presented the film *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), which starred Forest Whitaker and received critical and popular acclaim for its portrayal of Idi Amin's Uganda. A night of performances early in the residency featured readings of two new plays by two Ugandan playwrights: Deborah Asiimwe's *Cooking Oil* and Charles Mulekwa's *Remember Lumumba*. Four groups of guest artists working together and one group of Dartmouth students working with guest artists prepared to present their works publicly. Dartmouth students who were members of a summer performance course participated with Eti! artists in afternoon workshops with Hope Azeda to devise an original performance piece entitled *The Other Side of the Moon*, which explored the idea of unity as a force for both positive and negative action. As Azeda—whose work focuses on the genocide in Rwanda—noted, we generally

THE PLAY TALKS OF LIFE AS IT IS: ISSUES THAT CONNECT THROUGH AND BETWEEN NATIONAL AND CULTURAL BOUNDARIES IN HISTORIES, BOTH PERSONAL AND SHARED, INSCRIBED ON THE PERFORMER'S VERY BODY.

see unity positively, despite its ability to facilitate great evil. The performance explored the possibilities of this duality, using the image of the moon's dark and light sides as guiding metaphor (Edmondson "Question"). The residency culminated in an initial performance showcase at the College's Warner Bentley Theatre, where artists presented their works to the Hanover community, with post-performance audience discussions.

NEW YORK

After two weeks in Hanover, the group travelled to New York City on July 15, where three days of workshops and theatre-going preceded two days of showcase performances. Just as the project's residency portion created community among the artists and Dartmouth students, the New York workshops expanded that community to interact with African American, South African, Asian American, and Latin American members in what is sometimes thought of as the most important centre of American theatre.

I find such a conception of New York as the centre toward which all new or margin-dwelling work moves (or wishes to move) in itself problematic, not least in light of the city's economic inaccessibility and culture of exclusivity. Often excluding Eti!'s brand of new, alternative, multimedia, and region-crossing performance, New York remains a privileged, restrictive site: though many flock to the city to see theatre, those audiences may not, in general, be interested in Eti!'s

kind of work. Nonetheless, for the experience of interacting with innovative theatre workers and for maximum visibility, New York was an apt choice for their showcase performances.

The group met with a range of guest artists for themed workshops. "Theatre of Testimony" included South African director Liesl Tommy and African American playwright Tracey Scott Wilson (in rehearsals for *The Good Negro* at the time) and African American playwrights Lynn Nottage and Robert O'Hara. "Total Theatre" featured African American playwright/artist Carl Hancock Rux, Latino director/playwright Ruben Polendo, and Canadian-born Asian American director/artist Ping Chong. And "The Author's Voice" included New York-born Puerto Rican (Latina) playwright Migdalia Cruz, African American playwright Kia Corthron, and Nigerian-American dancer/performer/writer Okwui Okpokwasili.

I see particular connections for the Eti! group with Cruz and Corthron and their works. For example, Mũmbi Kaigwa's *They Call Me Wanjikũ*, a meditation on naming and identity in contemporary Kenya, correlates with Cruz's plays. In these, Cruz explores the ways we choose to adapt or are forcibly changed in violent circumstances—affected by institutionalized prejudices and economic inequities—that are often beyond our individual control. Kaigwa's solo performance, in its journey to find a name that suits—neither imposed nor arbitrary—also addressed the histories that can make such decisions about identities, and the ways we express them, so fraught. Corthron's focus on violence and responsibility in the contemporary U.S. and abroad finds compelling intersections with Cruz's insistence on theatre's including marginalized voices, its mandate to portray difference—and conflicts arising from that difference.

Relevant here also are George Seremba's *Come Good Rain*, an autobiographical solo piece about his harrowing escape from Uganda during the Amin and Obote regimes, and *Forged in Fire*, the collaborative performance conceived by Okello Kelo Sam, Robert Ajwang', and Laura Edmondson, which explored Okello's experiences in northern Uganda's more recent civil wars. The questions these two performances raise about the ability of dominant people or groups to extinguish opposition speak to Corthron's plays dealing with power struggles in circumstances of inequity and ambivalences in the lives of the powerful. Her 2001 play *Force Continuum*, for example, explores the issue of police brutality in black communities. The limits of shared identity are evident in all these works, in which socially, politically, or economically dominant groups and individuals exercise their abilities to control or affect the lives of those who surround them, regardless of shared ethnicity, nationality, or other ostensibly unifying aspects. The range of viewpoints and processes included in these workshops offered, in a spirit of cross-pollination, conversations about new ways we make identity and the conflicts these processes might instigate.

In the evenings, the core group from the residency attended a selection of performances representing a fairly diverse collection of New York's offerings, ranging from the now-canonical Broadway musical *Hair*, offered by Shakespeare in the Park, to new works at a Broadway house (*Passing Strange*) and a converted factory space (*TRACES/fades*). These evenings culminated in showcases presented on July 21 and 22 at CUNY's Graduate Centre.

In the first of these, the Tanzanian group Parapanda's performance of *Mtumishi wa Umma*, a man on his deathbed pleads with an absent brother to renounce corruption and return to an honest medical practice. In the solo performer's monologue, bracketed by music and movement, we heard what happens when even low-level corruption is allowed to flourish: the speaker made clear the toll taken on his own life, now nearly over, personalizing the issue and emphasizing the individual nature of the resulting misery. The staging underscored this, positioning the actor, wearing pajamas, attached to an IV. Without generalizing to trite statements about the commonality of human suffering, I see this theatre as clearing the way for difficult discussions of hard questions. As Parapanda actor Mnyenyelwa stated, the play talks of life as it is: issues that connect through and between national and cultural boundaries in histories, both personal and shared, inscribed on the performer's very body.

In the post-performance discussion, Mona Mwakalinga, a PhD candidate at the University of Kansas and a co-founder of the company, opened on the past and present role of traditional performances in the region and across the continent. The audience then turned the conversation to the mechanics of Parapanda's inception and operation, considering the source of the play's content and the impetus for its solo form and multimedia presentation. For Parapanda members, their roles as storytellers and performers of music, dance, and theatre help them address issues at the heart of their people's everyday lives; to engage with these topics—including political corruption, loyalty, and health care services—is "talking of life," as company member Mnyenyelwa said. Their performance also spoke about the interconnectedness of national political culture and personal responsibility and about our inherent responsibilities to one another as human beings.

MARGINAL STRATEGIES AND NEW SPACES

Eti!'s public aspect of showcase performance offered further opportunity for connection—and perhaps future collaboration—between showcase and colloquium attendees and residency practitioners. The project's mission, stated in the performance program, to "[develop] concrete and useful relationships" in order to foster "practical opportunities to build further connections between the U.S. and East Africa" was realized in conversation and performance. Further, however, and most interesting for me, the project also opened a space for intensifying interest in East Africa for artists and scholars both inside and outside East Africa. East African theatre and performance cultures are in my view still under-represented in international theatre studies, yet they offer much of potential interest to artists and scholars.

English-language-accessible scholarship about theatre on the African continent has tended to focus most intently on southern and western Africa. Indeed, I recently made an informal survey of book-length studies on theatre in any of the five East African countries, which revealed roughly twenty texts in total. Nigeria, in contrast, had thirty-one, and South Africa forty-six. This is not to suggest that East Africa has been wholly neglected; indeed recently published survey texts treat the region quite thoroughly, book chapters and articles appear with some regularity, and interest is certainly increasing. But this dearth of sustained, intensive scholarship on the region suggests to me that the Eti! organizers were correct in asserting that we operate under a "pervasive lack of knowledge" about East African countries, cultures, and theatre practices (Levitow). Not only is this the case now, but it seems a circumstance able to sustain itself through replication: few books mean little knowledge, which begets little interest, which results in few books. What I would like to suggest, however (following Hall), is that this position on the margins, at present intermittently attended to, need not be a position of weakness. It can instead offer a uniquely compelling angle from which to further enter the discourse. The Eti! artists, originating in a region relatively unfamiliar to many outside its boundaries, might now seize the burgeoning power of this region's unfamiliarity and marginality to forge new spaces for new relationships, ideas, and works.

As a concrete instance, both in content and creation, one might consider the way Mũmbi Kaigwa's Gĩkũyũ history encountered Andrea Kalima's traditional Tanzanian music—together on a New York stage before a diverse audience of practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts—in collaboration through national boundaries. Marginality's connection with this play's content is evident in Kaigwa's exploration of her personal history in its intersections with Kenya's cultural history and the legacy of naming in Gĩkũyũ culture. She moves through the pain and difficulty of reclaiming "lost names and identities" and rearticulating them in a fresh context. Kaigwa wrote and embodied that hitherto-untold history as a discourse counter to the historical master narratives of Kenyan experience. But beyond that thematic engagement with what might be thought of as strategic marginality, Kaigwa's play engaged in a cross-border collaboration with Andrea Kalima, whose music provided the structure for her movements. National, regional, family, and personal traumas—both shared and separate, but nonetheless connected—created a community where audience and performers (in this case, also the community of performers purpose-created in the Eti! residency) were able to process together the meanings of the post-trauma situation Kaigwa represented onstage. I see this successful moment of shared memory as vital to using marginality as a strategic position, since it was through this unprecedented collaboration that such witnessing occurred.

The Eti! project surely accomplished its goals of offering a space to support East African artists and collaborations, and it is clear that the other more practical aims—consciousness-raising, networking—were met. All well begun and well done. Beyond that, however, the most lasting effect that I hope this venture might have is to hold open a space for, yes, new conversations about East African theatre, but also new discourse and action wherein those artists, genres, and regions currently on the margins might take hold of such a position as a locus of strength from which to teach and to learn on their terms.

As the lights fade, a man's face and body, glistening with perspiration, trembles in the silence. That silence feels thick. It is difficult to move. Our ears ring with memory of drums thundering and the man's final, hoarse, words. His tormented face is the last thing to disappear into darkness; his pleas to an absent brother linger. We in the audience sit rapt, still for just a moment, hardly able to inhale. Eyes are closed, deliberate breaths taken, before appreciation, applause, and tears pour forth. The house lights come up. The thickness in the air eases as the audience shifts in their seats, breathes deeply again. A scholar steps forward and the discussion begins.

NOTES

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BIO

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GENesis : The Evolution of Discomfort

GENesis : The Evolution of Discomfort

Discomfort. That's the concept I chewed on over and over again during an intensive week among my colleagues as we gathered for the first ever Asian-Canadian theatre conference in Toronto last May. A quarter-century after the premiere of the first professionally produced Asian Canadian play—Rick Shiomi's *Yellow Fever*—it was clear, at least to me, that as artists of colour, we are still grappling with a society that is uncomfortable with our very existence.

Oh, I fought hard against the idea, believe me. I leapt into energetic debate during the sixteen artist and academic panels, jousting with the varied and thoughtful points-of-view espoused at each well-attended event. But the person I wrestled with most was me. It's 2010, isn't it? *What do you mean people are uncomfortable*?!

It started with Karen Shimakawa's excellent keynote address. A faculty member at NYU's law school and Tisch School of the Arts to whom "discomfort" is interesting both "politically and aesthetically," Karen's crossover expertise in law allowed her to reference some shocking examples of how discrimination is being redefined as discomfort—for instance, the Filipina nurse who lost her discrimination case in her bid to continue speaking her native language with her Tagolog-speaking co-workers at the California hospital where she worked. "Although it was determined that she had otherwise been a good employee for 10 years, and that the use of Tagolog did not jeopardize patients or compromise ward efficiency, it did make some employees and patients uncomfortable, and [. . .] this was sufficient grounds for banning it."[1] I was outraged: does the much-vaunted First Amendment to free speech only apply if the speech is in *English*?!

The theme continued: playwright/actor Marjorie Chan noted that "people go to shows that fit their comfort zone"; other panelists told stories of how people were "tricked" into coming by various promotions; producer Derrick Chua opined that "subscriptions expose people to work beyond their comfort zone." Putting the shoe on the other foot, playwright Chris Gatchelian revealed how "uncomfortable" he felt at his very first theatre experience, being the only non-white person in the audience. I took most umbrage at dramaturge Andrew Cheng's assertion that "audiences are not ready for colour-blind casting." I indignantly enumerated personal experiences where contemporary casting was accepted, even embraced by audiences. But by the end of the week, I realized that Andrew had a point: most Canadian audiences are indeed not ready, because they've been fed a steady diet in which the "normal" is presented as exclusively white. So of course they'd be uncomfortable—even distressed—when brown bread is offered instead.

Because discomfort is a normal part of being human. Most of us are uncomfortable at first with the unfamiliar, though there are those who find the new exhilarating and exciting. The dark side of discomfort is the desire—both conscious and unconscious—to erase or eradicate anything or anyone who causes discomfort. The up side is that the examination of the intersections of discomfort can make terrific drama, the kind of conflict that can form the foundation of compelling art. The trick for Asian-Canadian artists is to create our art despite the overwhelming forces of discomfort.

Valerie Sing Turner

The GENesis: Asian-Canadian Theatre Conference was produced by fu-GEN Asian-Canadian Theatre Company and the University of Guelph, May 3-9, 2010 in Toronto.

NOTES

1. Karen Shimakawa, "Performative Crossings in Asian North American Theater" (working title), paper presented at the GENesis: The Evolution of Discomfort Conference, 3-9 May 2010, Toronto.

BIO

Valerie Sing Turner IS A PROFESSIONAL THEATRE ARTIST BASED IN VANCOUVER WHO PERFORMS, WRITES, AND PRODUCES. SHE IS AN ASSOCIATE ARTIST WITH URBAN INK PRODUCTIONS AND ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE AT THE SHADBOLT CENTRE FOR THE ARTS IN BURNABY, BC. HER INTERDISCIPLINARY PLAY, *CONFESSIONS OF THE OTHER WOMAN*, IS DUE TO PREMIERE IN 2011/12.

The Last 15 Seconds in Montreal

The Last 15 Seconds in Montreal

May 26-29, 2010. There's a full moon and the evenings in Montreal are beautiful. The Festival TransAmériques is kicking off, and, as usual, outdoor activities are everywhere—in coffee shops, restaurants, and bars around the city.

Here, in a dance studio transformed into a tiny black box theatre at Concordia University, we are performing *The Last 15 Seconds*, a collective creation by Kitchener-Waterloo's The MT Space. Teesri Duniya Theatre is producing the show for the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for Theatre Research. The script treats the 2005 suicide attacks on the Jordanian capital, Amman. Every day our houses are full. People are leaving aside outdoor fun for live theatre in a black box.

The play treats the true story of the Syrian American filmmaker Mustapha Akkad and his daughter Rima, killed when suicide bomber Rawad Abed detonated himself in a prominent Amman hotel. Akkad is known for his *Halloween* movies, which were made to financially support his two major works: *The Message* (the story of Islam) and *Lion of the Desert* (about Libyan freedom fighter Omar Mukhtar). Our play imagines a confrontation between Akkad and Abed that leads up to the final moments before death. Directed by Lebanese-Canadian Majdi Bou-Matar, we are five actors (three women, two men), a text developer, a composer, and a video artist. The women play double parts, as family members of both victims and perpetrator. Anne-Marie Donovan plays Abed's mother and Akkad's wife: roles symbolizing the present, divisive politics of contemporary Arabia. Pam Patel plays Abed's wife (who didn't detonate despite her intention to die with her husband) and Akkad's daughter Rima (killed in the blast): these roles symbolize the unknown future. I play Abed's Grandmother and Akkad's mother: representing the glorious past of Arabs and the deep-rootedness of the mother nation. Alan K. Sapp and Trevor Copp play Mustapha Akkad and Rward Abed.

In Kitchener, our development included multiple open rehearsals where visitors—university students, researchers, and community members—were invited to attend and contribute their thoughts. Comments focused mainly on personal responses to the overall artistic power of the play. This first version of *The Last 15 Seconds* was more ritualistic: it tended to present Akkad as a victim of the attacks and almost free of responsibility. In the revised Montreal version, we added monologues to provide deeper character insight: both men are presented equally as victims who also hold responsibility for the violence. We wanted to avoid imposing a prescribed judgment or point of view—to leave audiences to judge for themselves.

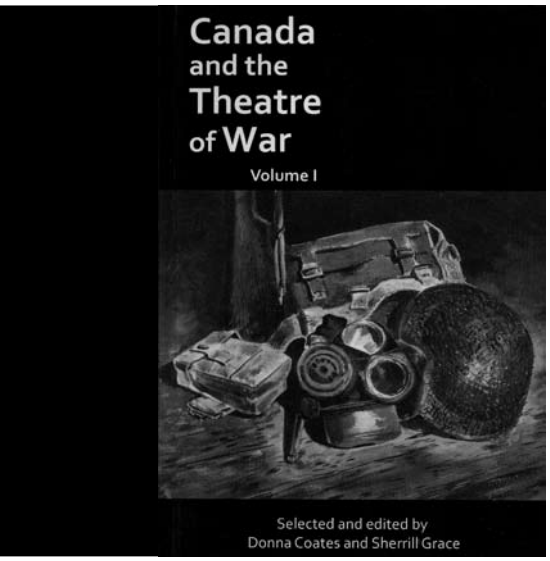
Along with theatre artists and academics, Montreal audiences included members of culturally diverse communities—First Nations, as well as Arabs from Jordan, Palestine, Syria, and Egypt. Audiences found the play artistically powerful and moving. Some people wanted to know how much of the story was historical documentation and how much was fiction. Social activists commented on the importance of solidarity in supporting peace and condemning wars and violence. In general, however, our Montreal audiences were more concerned with the representation, impact, and implications of the politics in the play.

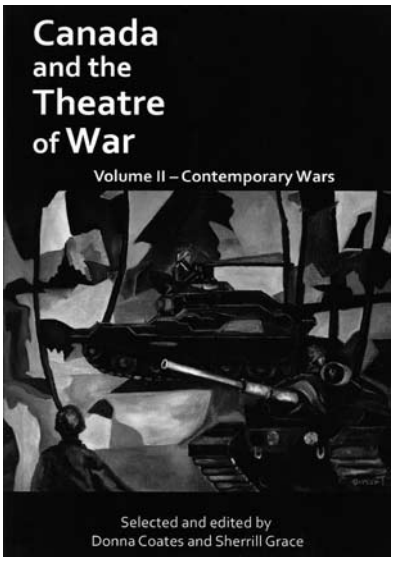
As I came to recognize during my time studying mime at Omnibus Theatre in Montreal, cultural diversity and cultural politics are a fact of life in this city. Here I found the audience response to our work complex and charged with insight. Performing *The Last 15 Seconds* in Montreal was deeply rewarding. We left with a heightened sense of the responsibility we carry in this show, a deeper commitment to perform it for other diverse audiences, and a desire to continue to seek growth through dialogue with our audiences.

Nada Homsi

BIO

Nada Homsi IS AN ACTOR, POET, WRITER, PAINTER, AND AN INSTRUCTOR FOR BOTH THEATRE AND MIME. SHE IS SYRIA'S FIRST PROFESSIONAL FEMALE PROFESSIONAL MIME, AND SHE HAS ACHIEVED CRITICAL ACLAIM IN AVANT-GARDE AND EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE IN THE ARAB WORLD.





BOOK REVIEW

BY ROBERT NUNN.

CANADA AND THE THEATRE OF WAR, VOLUME I

SELECTED AND EDITED BY DONNA COATES AND SHERRILL GRACE.
TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2008. PP. IX & 492;

CANADA AND THE THEATRE OF WAR, VOLUME II – CONTEMPORARY WARS

SELECTED AND EDITED BY DONNA COATES AND SHERRILL GRACE.
TORONTO: PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS, 2009. PP. X & 324.

Donna Coates and Sherrill Grace have compiled two anthologies of powerful plays about war by Canadian playwrights. The first volume is concerned with the two world wars of the twentieth century, and the second with contemporary wars. The phrase *Theatre of War* in the title captures the essence of these two anthologies perfectly. In the plays collected here, war is not a background against which a drama is played; it is the drama. Sherrill Grace begins her introduction to volume one by commenting on "theatre of war" as a "dead metaphor" (iii) frequently employed in speaking about war, but then she goes on to bring the metaphor back to life:

> Battles, like plays, must be professionally stage-managed, carefully directed, trained for, and rehearsed. Soldiers, like actors, must know and play their parts. Theatres [. . .] , like wars, work to define and consolidate nation states and national identities [. . .] , armies have often entertained themselves with theatrical events, and war has often been a subject for the stage. From the time of the Greeks, if not before, war and theatre have co-existed and overlapped in a complex mirroring performance of act and action, enactment and re-enactment. (iii-iv)

Sherrill Grace's introductions to both volumes provide an excellent critical framework, guaranteeing that the whole of these collections will be more than the sum of their parts. In her introduction to the first volume, she notes that the plays were all written by playwrights who did not directly experience either World War I or World War II. "Each is written by a man or woman born during or after World War II who must conduct research on the war she or he is trying to remember and understand" (iv). And this not simply on their own behalf, but on behalf of the nation: "It is only in retrospect that contemporary Canadians, in this case with the help of playwrights, can begin to grasp the significance of World War I for Newfoundland [. . .] or explore the assertion that Canada came of age as a nation during the April 1917 assault on Vimy Ridge" (iv).

It is interesting to note that in volume two, published a year after the first volume, Grace looks back at the first and notes an important pattern. She sees a

> steady, clear-eyed shift from *finding* meaning, reconciliation, and identity (notably a Canadian identity) in the World War I plays to an increas-

> ingly guilt-laden confrontation with Canada's past failures and complicities in the World War II plays. To put this simply, it is still possible to see Canadians as the good guys, or as the suffering victims, in World War I, but that innocence and nostalgia are not possible for the next world war. (iii-iv)

Here she identifies what these plays are all about: they "[refuse] to let the past come to an end" (iii). And we have seen recently how urgent that effort is. The uproar over a display in the Canadian War Museum that merely noted the controversy over the morality of the indiscriminate bombing of German cities in World War II is evidence enough of what's at stake in refusing to let the past end.

None of the plays in either volume are in the strict sense war plays. They do not take place in the trenches or on the battlefields. Rather, they are memory plays, whose protagonists urgently remember, relive, retell, return again and again to the same traumatic moment, are haunted in dreams and nightmares, and seek to understand. The frame of reference is almost always the present while the action of the play circles back to the inferno of war.

The plays about World War I in the first volume are emphatically memory plays. R. H. Thomson's *The Lost Boys: Letters from the Sons in Two Acts 1914–1923* is based on letters from the five great-uncles of his who had fought in the war. It is his tribute to them and enacts his struggle to enter imaginatively into their experience. In his foreword, Thomson writes, "I did not recognize the country which I was traversing until my feet were on the path" (6). David French's *Soldier's Heart* is an addition to his series of plays on the Mercer family. Here, as in *Salt-Water Moon*, the disastrous battle of Beaumont Hamel on July 1, 1916, weighs heavily on survivors and their families. Jacob Mercer does not rest until he succeeds in getting his father to break his silence and retell the terrible thing he did in the battle, the memory of which is destroying him and everyone close to him. "Soldier's heart" equals "shell shock" equals "war neurosis" equals "post traumatic stress disorder." In Stephen Massicotte's *Mary's Wedding*, a young woman, on the night before her wedding two years after the end of the war, dreams one last time of her first love who had been killed by an exploding shell. In this dream, they finally say goodbye. In *Dancock's Dance* by Guy Vanderhaeghe, an inmate in a mental hospital, formerly an officer, struggles to free himself from the tormenting spectre of the private he shot in a trench for refusing to go over the top. The arrival in the asylum of the Spanish Flu epidemic allows him to exorcise his nightmare as he uses his innate gifts of leadership to save lives. *Vimy*, by Vern Thiessen, was first produced in 2007 to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge. It takes place in a field hospital where six badly wounded survivors of the battle piece together their fragmentary memories of what they went through, in a desperate effort to heal.

Despite the remembered horrors of trench warfare, these plays are only indirectly angry about the appalling loss of life in the Great War. There is nothing in them to match the fury of some of the poems of Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon. Nothing to compare to Sassoon's vision of soldiers home from the war marching down Fleet Street and reacting to the sight of cheering "Yellow-Pressmen throng[ing] the sunlit street / To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from dying" by fixing bayonets and charging "the mob." The tone of these plays is elegiac; there is deep sadness rather than rage. The plays are laments: they picture the healing of wounds, the forgiveness of crimes done in the heat of battle, the recovery from loss.

The plays about World War II in the second half of volume one have nothing to do with remembering or reliving or recovering from the wounds of battle. They are post-war. Margaret Hollingsworth's *Ever Loving* follows three war brides through a quarter century of their efforts to build new lives in a new country. *None Is Too Many* by Jason Sherman is a brilliant theatricalization of the book of the same title by Irving Abella and Harold Troper, which chronicles Canada's refusal to open its doors to desperate Jewish refugees before, during, and even for some time after, the war. It is framed by the 1949 hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on Immigration and Labour, at which the country is finally called to account for its refusal to save Jewish lives. The final play in the volume, Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*, is another act of calling the nation to account, in this instance, for the lasting harm done by the mining of radioactive ore in the Northwest Territories to provide the raw material for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It spins threads of connection between the Japanese victims and the Dene miners who succumbed to cancer from exposure to radiation.

The second volume, *Contemporary Wars*, takes us into a very different territory. No more ignorant armies clashing by night. These have to do with the ugly face of war in our time: chaotic civil war pitting militia against militia against militia, undeclared war fuelled by lies, peacekeeping gone horribly wrong, unspeakable atrocity, torture and rape. It says something about our collective imagination about contemporary wars that in all but one of these plays the focus has shifted from Europe to the Middle East. Grace writes in her introduction, "these plays, like those about World War II, insist that Canadians remember, not simply the reassuring stories about war and forgiveness and family, but also the terrible ones in which we failed to act

or speak or in which we were complicit through our willed forgetting or were directly responsible for war crimes" (viii).

Two plays in the collection deal directly or indirectly with the decades of civil war and invasion in Lebanon. In *Game of Patience / Jeux de patience* by Abla Farhoud, translated by Jill Mac Dougall, a mother, newly arrived in Canada, grieving over the death of her teenaged daughter in the violence, presses her writer cousin who immigrated here decades before to find a word "shaped like a knife" (30) to express her loss. In *Scorched / Incendies* by Wajdi Mouawad, translated by Linda Gaboriau, a young man and woman, twins, are given instructions by the executor of their mother's estate to deliver sealed letters, one to their father and one to their brother, both unknown to them. The mother had made her way with her children to Canada from an unnamed country torn apart by civil war. Five years ago she suddenly stopped speaking and remained mute until, on her deathbed, she uttered one sentence. All these mysteries are gradually and painfully revealed, horror on top of horror, in the course of the play.

A Line in the Sand by Guillermo Verdecchia and Marcus Youssef is set during the preparations for the first Gulf War in 1990, but very closely mirrors the torture and murder of a Somali teenager by Canadian soldiers on a peacekeeping mission in Somalia in 1993.

The Monument by Colleen Wagner begins with an admission of guilt by a young militiaman sentenced to death by a war crimes tribunal for raping and killing twenty-three women in a civil war in an unnamed country. But his life is spared. He is handed over to the mother of one of the young women he killed, who abuses and torments him until he confesses in detail how he killed her daughter and takes her to the place in a forest where he had buried her. The introduction to the play notes that it has been performed in many countries, including Rwanda, where audiences felt "that she had somehow smuggled herself into the country during the genocide to write their story" (90). A sad testimony to the universality of this play.

Palace of the End by Judith Thompson consists of three extraordinary monologues, all based on actual people. The first features a young female American soldier based on Private Lynndie England, who was convicted of abusing Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison; the second features Dr. David Kelly, the British weapons inspector who accused Prime Minister Tony Blair's government of lying to the British public about Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction in order to sell the invasion. Kelly committed suicide after being subjected to savage hounding by the government. Thompson imagines his apologia as he lies dying. The third monologue is in the voice of Nehrjas Al Saffrah, an Iraqi woman tortured by Saddam Hussein's secret police in the 1970s and later killed by an American bomb in the first Gulf war. She recounts her torture and death. She is now a ghost, watching over Baghdad.

Man Out of Joint by Sharon Pollock interweaves accounts of abuse of detainees at Guantanamo, including Omar Khadr, a backward look at the imprisonment of Italian-Canadians in World War II, and the story of an American imprisoned in Canada who claims to have evidence that the U.S. administration had advance warning about a major attack by Al Qaeda in 2001 and chose to allow 9/11 to happen.

While all the plays in these collections have war as their subject, they are haunted by glimpses, dreams, visions of peace. A tentative gesture of repentance and forgiveness at the end of *The Monument.* The vision in *Palace of the End* of thousands of ghosts watching over Baghdad, waiting for peace to come and release them from their vigil. The description in *Soldier's Heart* of the Somme, years after the end of the war: "Each spring, the farmers plough up shells and bits of bone. But all that will end one day. And then there'll be just the fields again, and the blue hills, and the bright flowers of summer . . . . After all . . . the Somme is just a river. An ordinary little river" (102).

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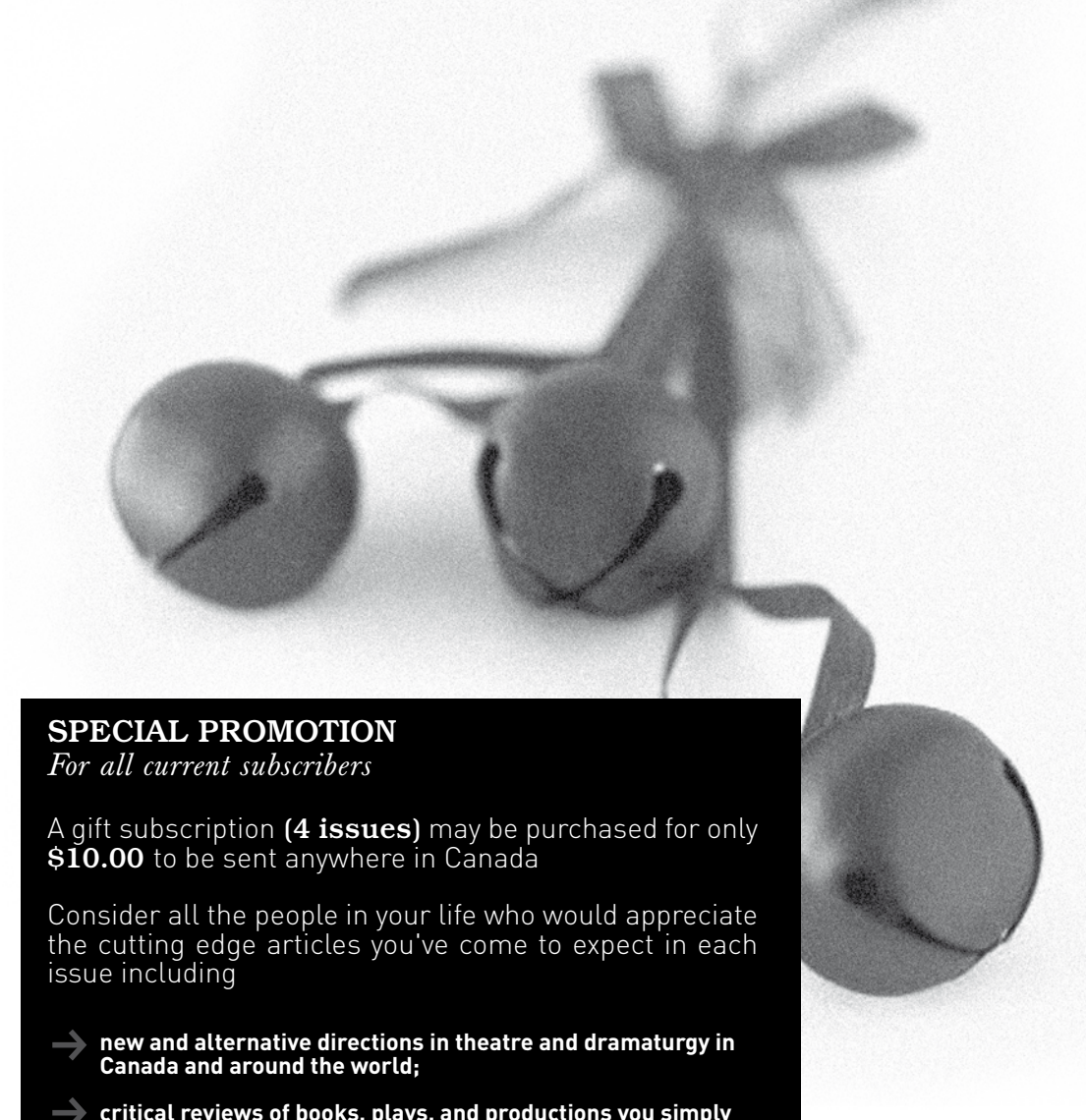
BIO

Robert Nunn TAUGHT DRAMATIC LITERATURE AND THEORY AND THEATRE HISTORY AT BROCK UNIVERSITY UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT IN 2000. HE HAS PUBLISHED NUMEROUS ESSAYS ON CANADIAN PLAYS AND PLAYWRIGHTS, INCLUDING HRANT ALIANAK, DAVID FENNARIO, DAVID FRENCH, SHARON POLLOCK, JUDITH THOMPSON, AND DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR, ON WHOSE WORK HE RECENTLY EDITED A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS. HE WAS CO-EDITOR OF *THEATRE RESEARCH IN CANADA/RECHERCHES THÉÂTRALES AU CANADA* FROM 1993 TO 1996.



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