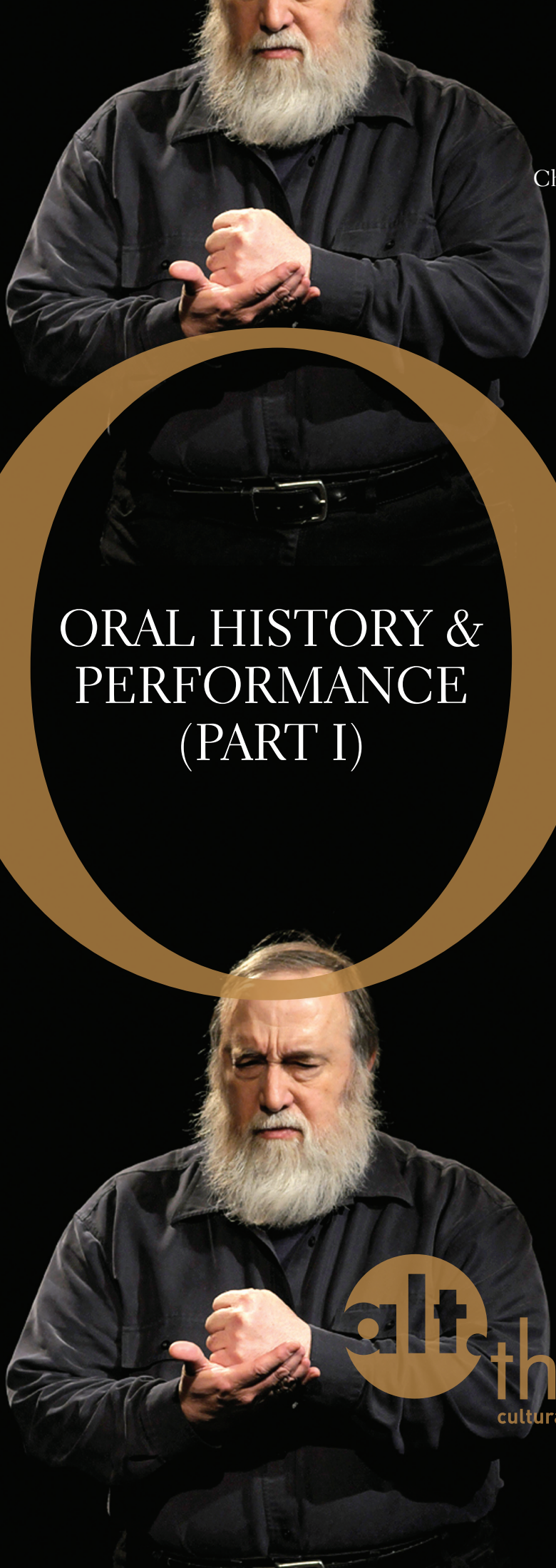


Layne Coleman
Georgina Beaty
Jonathan Seinen
Greg Gale
Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman
David Fennario
Annabel Soutar
James Forsythe
Isabelle Zufferey Boulton
David Diamond
Nisha Sajnani
Seth Soulstein
Sandeep Bhagwati
Caroline Künzle
Alejandro Yoshizawa

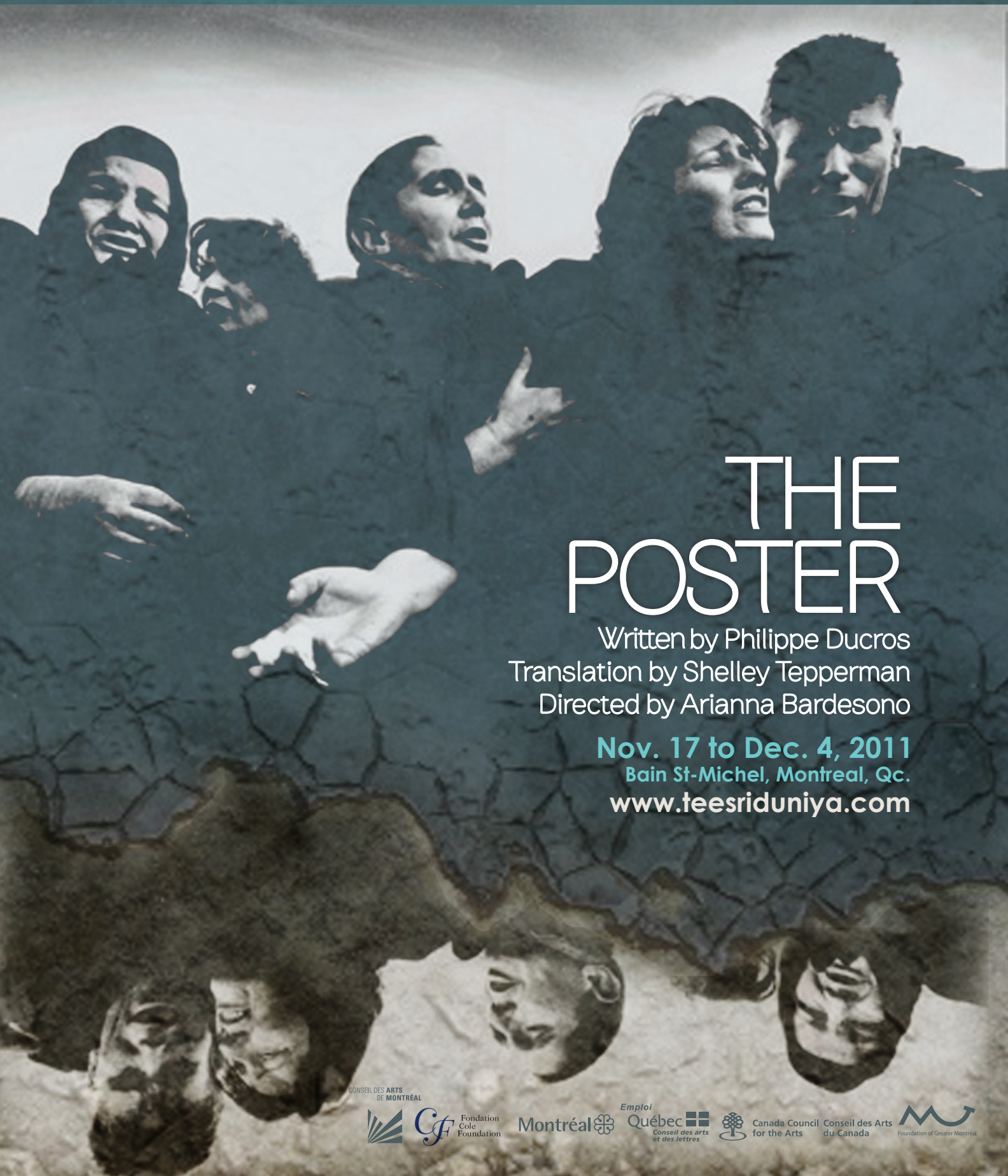
ORAL HISTORY & PERFORMANCE (PART I)

alt theatre
cultural diversity and the stage

Vol. 9 No. 1
September 2011 $8

Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

Teesri Duniya opens its 31st season with the English premiere of *The Poster* this fall. *L'Affiche*, the original French version of the play, was a finalist for the 2009 Grand prix de la dramaturgie (France) and was named 2009 Play of the Year by AQCT (Association québécoise des critiques de théâtre).



THE POSTER

Written by Philippe Ducros
Translation by Shelley Tepperman
Directed by Arianna Bardesono

Nov. 17 to Dec. 4, 2011
Bain St-Michel, Montreal, Qc.
www.teesriduniya.com

Conseil des arts de Montréal · Fondation Cole Foundation · Montréal · Emploi Québec Conseil des arts et des lettres · Canada Council for the Arts · Conseil des Arts du Canada · Foundation of Greater Montreal

alt theatre
cultural diversity and the stage
Vol. 9 No.1 - PART ONE of a Two-Part Expanded Edition
on Oral History and Performance

EDITORIAL

8 **Why Oral History and Performance?**
by Edward Little

ARTICLES

10 **Going South with** *Highway 63*
Georgina Beaty, Layne Coleman, Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman, Greg Gale, and Jonathan Seinen—actors and creators of *Highway 63*—on the personal connections forged with the places and people they represent in their collective creation.
IMAGES BY AVIVA ARMOUR OSTROFF

22 *Soldier Up to Safer Ground*
Jim Forsythe on verbatim theatre in his new play, featuring interviews with military from CFB Brandon who have served in Afghanistan, and Afghani Canadians living in Montreal.
IMAGES BY COMBAT CAM, COLIN CORNEAU

28 **A Challenge to Despair**
Isabelle Zufferey Boulton on the potential of verbatim testimony from youths in *The Gaza Monologues* to act as a dynamic catalyst for social change and political action.
IMAGES BY ISABELLE ZUFFEREY BOULTON

34 **Headlines Theatre's** *Us and Them (the inquiry)*
Seth Soulstein on David Diamond's innovative combination of Forum Theatre, systems theory, and participatory story gathering events to create Theatre for Living.
IMAGES BY DAVID COOPER

40 **Coming into Presence**
Nisha Sajnani of the Living Histories Ensemble on the risks and rewards of using improvisation and Playback Theatre to work "live" with personal stories from interviewers and interviewees in the Montreal Life Stories Project.
IMAGES BY DAVID WARD

50 *Lamentations*
Sandeep Bhagwati on his collectively created exploration in gestural theatre—an approach that "turns off the sound" in order to identify and work with "gestural accent" in videotaped oral history interviews.
IMAGES BY MATRALAB

SCRIPT

16 *Bolsheviki*
An excerpt from David Fennario's new solo, anti-war play drawing on interviews he recorded 30 years ago with a First World War veteran policitized by his exposure to trench warfare.
IMAGES BY © TALONBOOKS

DISPATCHES

21 **Reality as Poetic Narrative**
Annabel Soutar on the collapse of the Concorde overpass, "reality as poetic narrative," and Porte Parole's approach to creating documentary theatre in Montreal.
IMAGES BY ROBERT ETCHEVERRY

33 **Ssh! Listen …**
Caroline Künzle on *It Is Only Sound That Remains* – Shahrzad Arshadi's deeply personal exploration of "sound theatre" created from the personal audio recordings, journal entries, and letters of executed Montreal photojournalist Ziba Kazemi.
IMAGES BY SALMAN

39 **Headlines (Canada), Ashtar (Palestine), ...**
David Diamond on producing *The Gaza Monologues* in Metro Vancouver and the power of international collaboration.
IMAGES BY DAVID COOPER

BOOK REVIEW

56 Alejandro Yoshizawa reviews the diverse voices in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, edited by Will Hammond and Dan Steward.

Subscribe now

& receive Parts I & II of our expanded edition on Oral History & Performance at no extra cost!

Order online

www.teesriduniya.com/subscribe
or by phone 514 848 0238

With your subscription

- → save up to $14 off the cover price
- → save even more with a two-year subscription for only $30 (8 issues)

Subscribe to *alt.theatre* and receive 4 issues a year of Canada's only magazine tackling politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage. For over ten years, *alt.theatre* has provided a forum for artists, activists, academics, and others interested in issues of cultural diversity...

- → new and alternative directions in theatre and dramaturgy;
- → profiles of artists, companies, current practices, and influences;
- → critical reviews of books, plays, and productions;
- → comparative analyses of national and international approaches to cultural diversity and the arts.

Upcoming in alt.theatre

9.2 Oral History and Performance (Part II)

DAVID FENNARIO's poem about women munitions workers in Verdun.

DON BOUZEK , CATHERINE COLE, and **MARIA DUNN** on interdisciplinary "cultural roadbuilding" in Edmonton's labour movement through exhibitions, story-gathering, interventionist documentary theatre and "Video Ballads."

GARY KIRKHAM on The MT Space theatre's approach to collective creation and oral history in a play about terrorism.

JAN SELMAN reviewing *The Applied Theatre Reader*.

JENNY MONTGOMERY on how her unexpected personal experience of immigration overtook her verbatim play about immigration and home in Quebec.

LAURA FREITAG interviews Yael Farber about her Theatre of Witness in South AfrIca and her incorporation of documentary material and testimony into classical plays.

LINA DE GUEVARA on Puente Theatre's approach to creating participatory interview-based theatre in Victoria's immigrant communities.

MICHAEL KILBURN on Shaw Pong Liu's inclusion of verbatim testimony from contemporary combat veterans in her adaptation of Stravinsky's *A Soldier's Tale*.

RACHAEL VAN FOSSEN and Hourig Attarian on "testimony as process" in their research-creation performance project based on oral histories of the Armenian Genocide.

STEVE HIGH on the potential of oral history and performance in the classroom.

alt.theatre
cultural diversity and the stage

Vol. 9 No.1 - PART ONE of a Two-Part Expanded Edition
on Oral History and Performance

alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

alt.theatre welcomes suggestions or proposals for interviews, news, pieces of self-reflection, analytical articles, and reviews of books, plays, and performances. Submissions to ***alt.theatre*** are vetted by at least two members of the editorial board as well as external reviewers where appropriate. Contributors retain copyright of their articles with the understanding that any subsequent publication will cite ***alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*** as the original source. ***alt.theatre*** retains the right to distribute copies of published articles for educational and promotional purposes. Please query the editors before submitting any work for consideration: alt.theatre@teesriduniya.com

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

Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales Du Québéc/Library and Archives Canada ISSN 1481-0506

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

Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

"Change the World, One Play at a Time"

For more information, contact
Teesri Duniya Theatre
1006 Rue de la montagne, Suite 111
Montreal, QC H3G 1Y7
Tel. 514. 848. 0238
email : info@teesriduniya.com
www.teesriduniya.com

www.facebook/teesriduniya

COVER PHOTO
© matralab
James Louder in *Lamentations*

FSC www.fsc.org
MIXTE
Papier issu de sources responsables
FSC® C016245

Conseil des arts et des lettres Québec
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE MONTRÉAL

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

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Periodical Fund (CPF) of the Department of Canadian Heritage towards our project costs.

Canadian Heritage | Patrimoine canadien
Canada

CONTRIBUTORS

EDITORIAL

EDWARD (TED) LITTLE

is a professor of theatre at Concordia University, editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre*, and associate artistic director of Teesri Duniya Theatre. He is a member of the coordinating committee and leader of the performance working group for the Montreal Life Stories project, and he is currently embarking on the new research project, Going Public: Oral History, New Media, and Performance, with Liz Miller and Steve High.

ARTICLES

LAYNE COLEMAN

is a former artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille and a writer. He was nominated for a national magazine award for his story "Oasis of Hope," published in *The Walrus.* Layne taught acting at the University of Saskatchewan in 2010-2011, and this past summer (2011) he produced and directed the film *The Shape of Rex* (which he co-wrote with Bill Hominuke) in Saskatoon.

CHARLOTTE CORBEIL-COLEMAN

graduated from the playwriting program at the National Theatre School of Canada in 2008. Her writing credits include a CBC radio play, *The Summer of February; The End of Pretending* (2002 Summerworks Eye Audience Choice); and *Scratch* (2007 Herman Voaden award), which opened Factory Theatre's 2008/2009 season and was nominated for a Dora award (Outstanding New Play) in 2009 and a Governor General's Award in 2010. Charlotte most recently worked for the radio series *Afghanada* (CBC).

GEORGINA BEATY (see production photos pages 10 to 15)

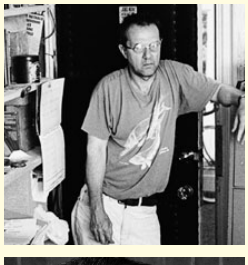
is an actor, creator, and co-founder of Architect Theatre. She has appeared in *The Shape of a Girl* (Greenthumb, Jessie award), *Unity (1918)* (Alberta Theatre Projects), *And So It Goes, Bone Cage* (Downstage), *Suspended* (Boca del Lupo), *Pig* (High Performance Rodeo, Canoe Festival), *Queen Lear* (Urban Curvz), *Easter* and *Ah, Wilderness!* (Chemainus) and the collective creation *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show* (Architect Theatre/ Passe Muraille).

JONATHAN SEINEN (see production photos pages 10 to 15)

is a theatre artist working primarily in collective creation. An associate artist with lemonTree creations and co-artistic producer of Architect Theatre, he directed *Still Life (SummerWorks)* and Jean Genet's *Deathwatch* (lemonTree), and performed in *As You Like It* (Banff Centre/Citadel). In the fall of 2011, Jonathan will appear in *The Normal Heart* (Studio 180) at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre. Jonathan is a graduate of the University of Alberta and the National Theatre School.

GREG GALE (see production photos pages 10 to 15)

was most recently seen onstage in *Vimy* at the Blyth Centre for the Arts and in *Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show* at Theatre Passe Muraille. Other recent credits include *Sir John A. Back from the Dead Concert Tour* (MacDonald Festival, Kingston) and Red Fightin' Blue (Talk is Free Theatre, Barrie). Greg is a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada, where he was the recipient of the Hnatyshyn Foundation's Emerging Artist's Grant for a student showing promise in their area of study.

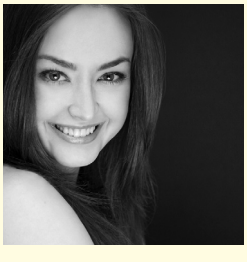


DAVID FENNARIO

is a playwright/performer, social activist, and former weekly columnist for the *Montreal Gazette*. Award-winning plays published by Talonbooks: *On The Job* and *Balconville* (Chalmers 1976, 1980), *Joe Beef* (Prix Pauline-Julien 1986), *Death of René Lévesque (Montreal Gazette*, 2003 Play of the Year). Twice profiled by the NFB, his plays have been televised on CBC and Bravo. His 1974 memoir *Without a Parachute*, republished as *Sans parachute* (2010), won poet Gilles Hénault a Governor General's Award for translation. Fennario was the 2007 candidate for Québec solidaire in Vielle Verdun, where he was born and still resides.

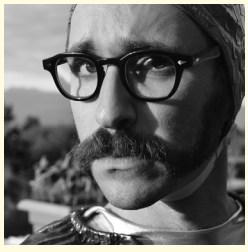
JAMES FORSYTHE

is professor and head of the Drama Program at Brandon University. He wishes to acknowledge the support of professors Ted Little and Steven High, the Brandon University Research Council, and the volunteer soldiers and Afghan Canadians that participated in this project. Special thanks to Lib Spry.



ISABELLE ZUFFEREY BOULTON

is a Canadian actress and writer based in New York City, where she graduated from the Stella Adler Studio. She holds a BA in Economics and English Literature from McGill University, where she founded a local student chapter of Oxfam Canada. Isabelle is currently collaborating with choreographer Shannon Gillen and director Sherri Kronfeld on a new dance theatre piece, in a dual residency at Springboard Danse Montreal and the Stella Adler Studio.

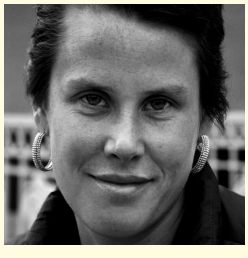


SETH SOULSTEIN
is a playwright, actor, and activist currently pursuing an MA in Theatre Studies at the University of British Columbia. He is studying ways theatre can be made politically powerful while remaining dramaturgically engaging. His sketch comedy ensemble, the Late Night Players, toured the US from 2003-2009. In 2004, he co-founded the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit alliance aimed at engaging youth in social justice by seeking inspiration from modern storytelling.

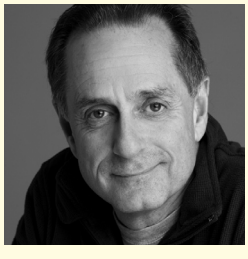
NISHA SAJNANI
is the director of Creative Alternatives and the director of the Drama Therapy, Community Health and Prevention program at the Post Traumatic Stress Center (New Haven). Nisha is on faculty at New York University where she teaches arts-based research and at Yale University where she teaches a course on "Theatre, Trauma, and Change." Nisha is the president-elect of the National Association for Drama Therapy.

SANDEEP BHAGWATI
is a multiple award-winning composer, theatre director, and media artist with Indian and diverse European backgrounds. As Canada Research Chair for Inter-X Arts at Concordia University, Montreal, since 2006, he currently directs matralab, a research/creation centre for intercultural and interdisciplinary arts. His current work centres on comprovisation, intertraditional aesthetics, the aesthetics of interdisciplinarity, gestural theatre, sonic theatre, and interactive visual and nonvisual scores.

DISPATCHES



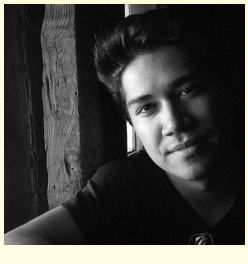
ANNABEL SOUTAR
is the artistic director of Porte Parole, a documentary theatre company based in Montreal. Her play *Sexy béton* will tour around Quebec in November-December 2011 and her play *Seeds* will premiere at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto in February 2012 in a co-production with Crow's Theatre. She lives in Montreal with her husband, actor Alex Ivanovici, and their two daughters, Ella and Beatrice.



DAVID DIAMOND
is co-founder and artistic director of Headlines Theatre (1981-now). He has directed over 450 community-specific Theatre for Living projects and trainings throughout N. America and Europe, as well as in Namibia, Rwanda, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Palestine, and Singapore. He has received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of the Fraser Valley and the Otto René Castillo Award for Political Theatre, and is the author of *Theatre for Living: the art and science of community-based dialogue* (winner of the American Alliance of Theatre and Education 2008 Distinguished Book Award).

CAROLINE KÜNZLE
works as a researcher and radio producer for Montreal Life Stories, an oral history project gathering the stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. In her free time, she writes, paints, and plays music. Künzle collaborated with Shahrzad Arshadi and Moe Clark on the production of *It Is Only Sound That Remains.*

BOOK REVIEW



ALEJANDRO YOSHIZAWA
is a Masterís student in the department of history at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. His current research investigates the history of *Matsutake* (Pine Mushroom) picking in the Japanese-Canadian community. The project, partly funded by the NAJC, will be chronicled in a film, *The Hunt For Matsutake*, set to be complete in late 2011- early 2012.

Why Oral History and Performance?

BY EDWARD LITTLE

This two-part expanded issue of *alt.theatre* has its genesis in the five-year SSHRC-funded Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and Other Human Rights Violations project. Launched in 2007, the project brings together twenty-eight researchers, three Montreal universities, and eighteen community partner organizations—an interdisciplinary mix of academics, artists, educators, and activists. At its heart, Montreal Life Stories is an oral history project. Principle investigator Steve High is a Canada Research Chair in public history, and we are conducting and archiving hundreds of interviews. From the project's inception we have been concerned that Montreal Life Stories reaches beyond the archive to sensitize, educate, bridge generational and cultural divides, forge relationships, and engage the broader public in deeper social and political engagement.

Four of our seven working groups represent specific communities—Cambodia, Rwanda/Great Lakes of Africa, Haiti, and the Holocaust. The remaining three—education, performance, and refugee youth—work across the project to develop curriculum for schools, explore how the arts might engage with collected material, and create additional community relationships. We seek sustainable public engagement through mutually beneficial community-university partnerships modelled on "shared authority" (Frisch) and a commitment to the life story as a whole. As Steve High puts it,

> The shift from testimony to life history is fundamental. It considers how mass human rights violations are experienced and remembered. What does it mean to be a 'survivor' ? How do individuals and communities construct and transmit their stories to their children and to people outside their social networks? When, where and why are particular stories about mass violence told, and by whom? (n.p.)

This marks the fifth and final year of the research phase of Montreal Life Stories. From now to March 2012 we are focusing on legacy and dissemination through exhibitions, performances, and publications; workshops in ethics, interview techniques, and digital storytelling; and longer-term initiatives that include community-based documentation centres and an online Montreal Life Stories database housing interviews, digital stories, maps, timelines, and contextual information (the database's Stories Matter software is an application developed specifically for our project).[1]

We begin this issue of *alt.theatre* with an appropriately co-authored article about *Highway 63*—a collective creation about Fort McMurray and the Alberta Tar Sands. Layne Coleman, his daughter Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman, Georgina Beaty, Greg Gale, and Jonathan Seinen travelled to "Fort Mac," lived with the locals, and created a play. Their reflections resonate with the community-engaged storytelling—the "direct relationship between actor and material" and "emphasis on truth (whether actual or 'mythic')"—charted by Alan Filewod's early collectively created documentary drama (TPM's 1972 *The Farm Show* and 25th Street Theatre's 1977 *Paper Wheat*) (27).[2]

Next up is an excerpt from David Fennario's new one-man show *Bolsheviki*, an anti-war play written to be performed in a Brechtian, non-illusionary storytelling style. *Bolsheviki* is not verbatim theatre, but it takes its "tone and timbre" from an interview Fennario did some 30 years ago with a WWI veteran gassed in the trenches. Fennario explains, "I did not write *Bolsheviki* to mourn or honour the Dead—it was written to avenge their slaughter. I tried my best to design *Bolsheviki* as a weapon to be used against warmongering by anti-war activists." When Fennario himself performs, it is also deeply "self-revelatory" (Emunah)—incorporating anecdotes from his life in Point St. Charles and references to his own struggle with neurological disease. The goal is to forge deep personal connections between storyteller, story, audience, and the issue at hand. Essentially, this is a twenty-first-century vision for the kind of acting pioneered by the likes of Brecht and Meyerhold—a self-revelatory artist-activist political antidote to the contemporary "hierarchal dominance of illusionary theatre." For Fennario, "theatre produced as a political vehicle—documentary, neighbourhood, verbatim, etc.—is better served when performed in a non-illusionary style. The illusionary approach dulls and lessens the political and artistic effect by putting up that infamous invisible fourth wall."

Following Fennario is a dispatch from Annabel Soutar—artistic director of Montreal's *Project Porte Parole*. Soutar creates documentary theatre with mixed francophone-anglophone audiences in mind. *Porte Parole* has tackled the Quebec health care system (*Santé* 2003), the treatment of Algerian refuges (*Montréal la blanche* 2004), and the legal battle between a Canadian farmer and GMO seed manufacturer, Monsanto (*Seeds*, 2005). *Porte Parole*'s latest three-part piece, *Sexy Béton* (2008, 2010, 2011) examines the 2006 collapse of the De La Concorde overpass — a disaster labelled a traffic accident to reduce insurance and public liabilities. For Soutar, expressing "reality as poetic narrative" allows audiences to recognize their complicity in the shaping of public narratives, and thus their capacity to re-write the story through socio-political action.

James Forsythe of Manitoba's Brandon University writes of deploying verbatim theatre to bridge ideological and cultural divides. Between 2006 and 2008, Forsythe created *Soldier Up* from interviews conducted with soldiers and families in CFB Brandon who had direct experience of the mission in Afghanistan. He writes of "using verbatim theatre to justify or allow unpopular points of view to be heard." His stance as interviewer and playwright/director is key:

> As I stated at the start of rehearsals to the cast, I did not believe that my views on the mission were relevant and I would prefer if they kept theirs to themselves. All I wanted was for them to honour the material and not comment on it. Verbatim is someone else's truth, and as an actor you have to insure that nothing is filtering any truth you don't agree with. My intention to appear to be subjectively on their side regardless of what opinions were being offered was constant.

Forsythe became an affiliate of Montreal Life Stories in 2011 when he came to Quebec to conduct interviews with Afghani-Canadians. He is now back in Brandon combining this material with *Soldier Up* to create an "intra-cultural conversation" with the new play, *From Soldier Up to Safer Ground*.

Isabelle Zufferey Boulton's piece on *The Gaza Mono-Logues* in New York City considers the impact of direct participation in creating and performing community-engaged documentary theatre. The play consists of monologues from thirty-three Palestinian youths (ages 13 to 18) who experienced the 22-day Israeli offensive on Gaza between December 2008 and January 2009. An initiative of Gaza's Ashtar theatre, the play was created over a seven-month period and involved training in creative writing and aspects of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre. Nadel Sha'ath, the project's psychologist, observed a measurably "significant psychological improvement" in the participating adolescents. On the international stage, the Gaza Monologues project has become the theatrical equivalent of a YouTube video gone viral. On the day of the play's premiere in October 2010, "more than 1500 young people in fifty cities in thirty countries also performed the monologues." In November 2010, when Palestinian youth were prohibited from leaving Gaza to perform, by invitation, at the UN, other companies and youths stepped up. The play continues to be performed around the world. Zufferery Boulton describes the play as "a compelling argument for peace," with the potential to "engage a true dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians."

Caroline Künzle's dispatch considers Montreal Life Stories artist-in-residence Sharzad Arshadi's exploration in "Sound Theatre"—where lights are dimmed and the audience focuses intensely on the act of listening. Arshadi set out to express how time spent with the archival remnants of the personal and familial life of Ziba Kazemi—the Montreal photojournalist executed by Iranian authorities—evoked in Arshadi a deep post-mortem personal friendship.

Seth Soulstein takes up the theme of community-engaged resident artists in his piece on Vancouver's Headlines Theatre and the Us and Them project. Headlines, like Ashtar Theatre, has deep roots in the sociopolitical ecology of its geographic community. The Us and Them project, typical of Headlines' work, solicits stories from a wide range of community perspectives, then works with these stories using Theatre for Living (TFL)—an approach developed by Headlines' artistic director David Diamond. TFL is an evolution of Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre combined with a "systems theory"approach that posits that social structures that "create divisions between 'oppressors' and those they oppress are simply manifestations of repeated behaviors; investigate those behaviors and learn how to change them, and you may just change the structure of your society."

Following Soulstein, David Diamond's dispatch reflects on links between the Us and Them and the Gaza Monologues projects and his decision to stage the monologues in Vancouver.

Next up is Nisha Sajnani, a community partner with Montreal Life Stories. She and other members of the project have been adapting and expanding the range of Playback Theatre to work with both interviewers and interviewees in ways that "seem to shrink the distance between researchers, actors, and audiences" and "make our interdependence and accountability to each other palpable." Playback is an improvisational form where audience members publicly share stories that are then acted out in improvisation by the Playback ensemble. Sajnani describes this as foregoing "the premeditated architecture of other forms of biographical theatre, such as verbatim or documentary theatre" while approximating "the unpredictable, liminal, and relational process of oral history."

Sandeep Bhagwati is also a member of Montreal Life Stories. To create his "Gestural Theatre," Bhagwati and his actors turned off the audio in videotaped interviews in order to work with moments of social and cultural rupture and displacement in the gestures, facial expressions, and body language of Montreal Life Stories interviewees. Citing Richard Sennett's notion of the "tyranny of intimacy," Bhagwati's work critiques the confessional voice—questioning assumptions that an emotional truth makes a social and political point more valid and pertinent.

The issue concludes with Alejandro Yoshizawa's review of *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*. Yoshizawa effectively summarizes many of the issues raised by the contributors in this issue—the relationship of this work to journalism, questions of ethics and integrity, the role and positioning of the audience, and notions of reality and fiction, "truth" and accuracy. These themes will be further taken up in our December issue (Vol. 9.2)— Oral History and Performance Part II.

NOTES

1 Visit www.histoiresdeviemontreal.ca

2 Coleman is a former artistic director of both Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre and Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM).

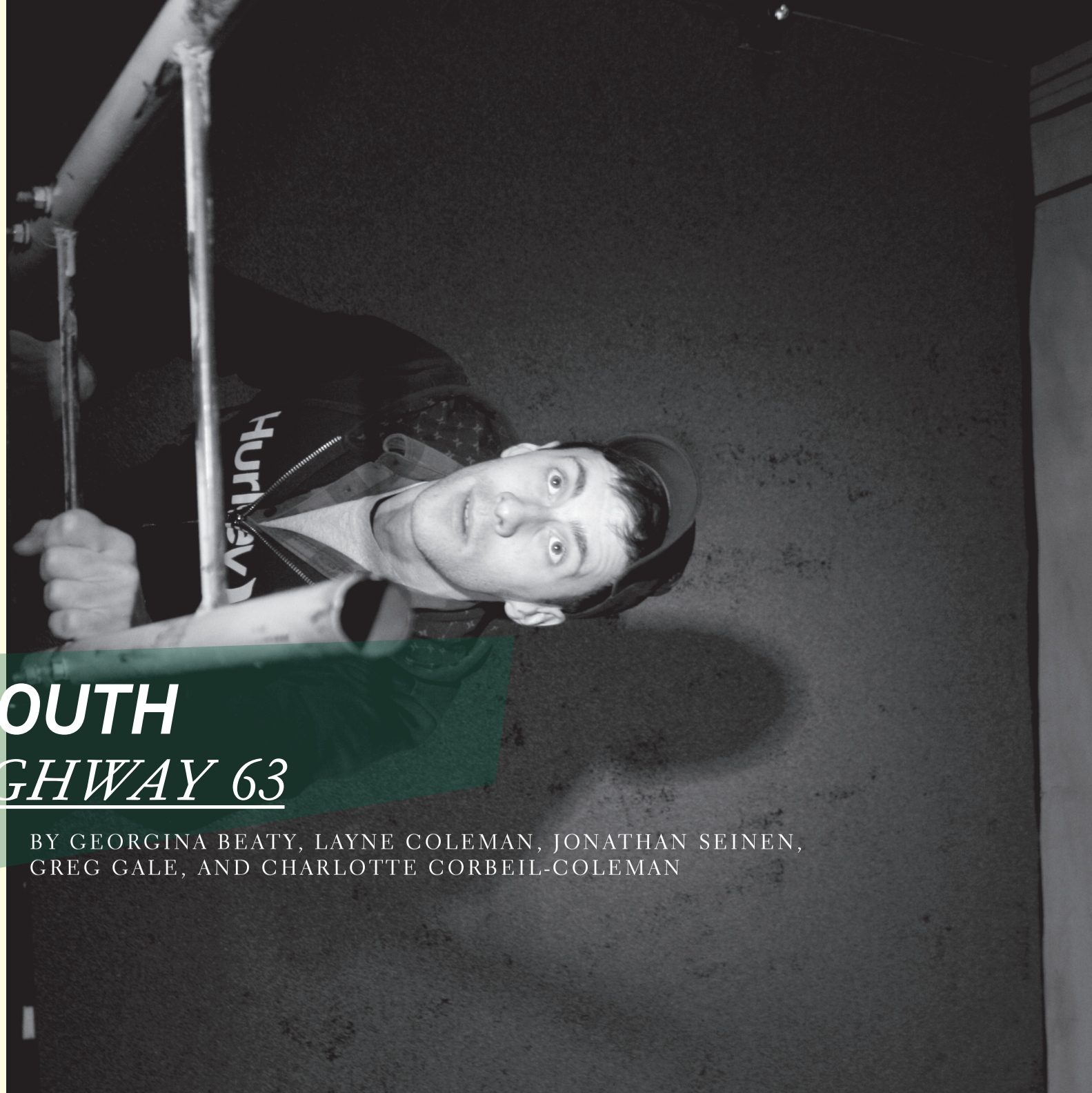
WORKS CITED

Emunah, Renee. "Self-Revelatory Performance." *Acting for Real. Drama Therapy: Process, Technique, and Performance*. New York: Brunner/Masel, 1994: 289-294.

Fennario, David. Personal email. 13 September 2011.

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.

High, Steven, and Edward Little. "Introduction." *Remembering War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations: Oral History, New Media and the Arts*. Ed. Steven High, Edward Little, and Ry Duong. Book manuscript under peer review at University of Toronto Press.



GOING SOUTH WITH *HIGHWAY 63*

BY GEORGINA BEATY, LAYNE COLEMAN, JONATHAN SEINEN, GREG GALE, AND CHARLOTTE CORBEIL-COLEMAN

COMING IN FROM THE COLD

"Wait till you see it in the summer. You drive past the 7-Eleven and all of these green caterpillars uncurl from the ceiling, from the fluorescent lights, like little streamers. All the teenagers hang out, all the drug deals are happening. The owner likes opera music and it blasts from these speakers."

This is how I remember the description of McMurray in the summer. I don't know if it's true, I never did see the 7-Eleven Opera, though the scene has played out in my head often in all of its neon glory.

On our second trip to Fort McMurray we plan to uncover the dirt. We will get past the public face of McMurray. It is the summer. Last time we were here, everything was brutally cold; my eyelashes froze together and every time I walked into a building they melted and it looked like I was crying.

Day one. Summer. Jonathan and I leave Greg and Charlotte, we walk out to see McMurray the way she wants to be seen.

"You have to come back in the summer."

We walk along Franklin Avenue. Dust kicks up from the familiar white trucks, whose cabs seem to hover and float above the huge wheels. Last year, McMurray was the place I felt most at home and invested. As a peripatetic theatre artist, the feeling of home was unexpected, and it's unsettling to be back.

Jonathan and I go to the Sobeys grocery store and three dollars later we have ice cream and root beer and are at the river making floats. If you look straight ahead and hold up your hands like blinders on a horse, you could think you were in an undiscovered Northern jungle. It's warm and the sunsets are not a localized blush but a full sky flush. Take away the blinders and there is garbage all over this patch of path by the river, construction sites, a few tents peeking out from the trees where people live when they can't afford housing in McMurray.

In our week here, we see the dirt. We smell the bitumen in the air. We discover that the show is already created and its roots are strong. We gather more information and impressions, but what people tell us has reached a looping point where we recognize what is and isn't said to us from other stories we've been told.

As we've performed *Highway 63*, people say, "Did that really happen?'" or, from someone whose interview ended up in the play, "That's not how I said it. I wasn't actually in the urology department." What is true?

Sometimes we've altered text to make it more interesting, or because we don't remember the exact words someone used, or sometimes we've absolutely invented a character. Interviews involve fiction just as our invented characters involve the truth, and both the interviews and the fiction construct and deconstruct mythologies about this place. Only through the combination of real "portraits" and fictional characters could we access the McMurray without blinders.

Going back to McMurray reminds me that the fiction in *Highway 63* tells some of the deepest truths; it says what people won't say in an interview, it holds the sensation of being in a place, the glow of the 7-Eleven on Franklin and the calm of the float planes that now land in front of us as our ice cream melts and we drink the last of the root beer.

Georgina Beaty

Interviews involve fiction just as our invented characters involve the truth, and both the interviews and the fiction construct and deconstruct mythologies about this place.

© Aviva Armour Ostroff / Greg Gale, Georgina Beaty, Jonathan Seinen in *Highway 63*

E-MAIL FROM THE BACKSPACE

The cast is hitting the tone of the room perfectly.

Andrew Nikoforuk was there and talked afterwards. He has the aura of a modern saint, unaffected and brilliant, the journalist who, literally, wrote the book on the Tar Sands and is a supporter of the show. He made the point: Canada was altered when it became America's number one supplier of oil. When you are America's premier supplier of energy you are no longer who you think you are. The Oil Sands are turning our country into a Petro Dollar State with the accompanying problems that any of those states have. The Oil Sands have inflated our dollar so that we have lost 345,000 manufacturing jobs. He addressed the ethical oil propaganda—this notion that our oil is somehow ethical because we have fewer human rights abuses than other places. He shrugged and asked the question, "How can oil be ethical? It's oil. "

He was emphatic that we need to have a conversation about the Tar Sands across Canada. It's transforming our country. We heard about the history of monitoring "up there" which was shocking. The corruption that oil induces is real and dangerous to a democracy. The living beyond our means and the buying of peoples' favour with money that won't be there in the future. The violence against the land and its people in order to buy our silence and docile partnership with corporate interests. We are selling out the future for a corrupt present. The companies in Alberta Oil Sands development are the same as those in Nigeria, and everywhere else. It's the same culture. It's the same blood on the hands. It's been said that Suncor gave Gaddafi a billion dollar bribe to be in Libya.

Andrew calls Peter Lougheed a true statesman. He speaks glowingly about Peter Lougheed's five points: Go slow. Talk about it. Behave as if you are an owner. Put money away for future generations. Clean up the mess.

Ted Johns and Janet Amos were at the opening (original *Farm Show* actors). I could hear their laughter blessing the proceedings. At the end of the performance Ted gave it a thumbs up. It was better for me than a good review in the *New York Times*. The distance between Toronto and Fort McMurray is huge. This show shrinks that distance.

Layne Coleman

AN EDMONTON ACTOR SPEAKS …

What do the oil sands/Tar Sands/ bitumen sands have to do with the daily lives of those in Canada's biggest city. Well, actually, everything, but not obviously.

There's a lot of competition for theatre audiences in Canada's largest city. And people need a good reason to venture down to Queen and Bathurst, one street north and one street east, to sit in a small windowless brick room to hear about the state of the world.

A place in Theatre Passe Muraille's season, a coveted chance to share this work with a new city. Three weeks in a rehearsal hall to polish and refine, to theatricalize from the stories and lessons learned on the road. A band taking the songs they wrote on tour into the studio to record the album. Can the record capture the essence, the live-ness of the tour, those nights on the road, the rowdiness of the crowds in far-flung centres, the sleeping close in borrowed quarters?

The lights! Suddenly a design! The lights were too good, too flashy, too dynamic, bright in our eyes and blinding us, losing that essential connection with the audience, those with whom we have come here to share, open up, experience the voices of Fort McMurray once again: To sit next to them and breath the same air. The lights remind us that we are back in a theatre. We caught this in previews and changed to a simpler design, an open design—a well-lit stage with few cues and a lot of eye contact. The introduction to the play is an invitation, to come with us, journey with us, and see what we saw on the Northern tip of Highway 63.

For me the best new feature of this production was the cork on the floor of the stage. A fine layer of brown powder on the stage floor, re-spread daily by stage management into a seamless covering, then disturbed by the actors as they tell their story, revealing the blackness below. As *NOW Magazine* put it, the "clever manipulation of the stage's floor takes the phrase 'carbon footprint' to a whole new level" (12-13 February 2011)

This play lives in its metaphor. The metaphor of the three characters in their journeys, their search for meaning and love and home echoes all of us in contemporary Canada, the impossibility of making connections that last when we pay little attention to our responsibilities towards the planet and our neighbours. The trade-offs and compromises that make up our daily lives, the goodbyes that break our hearts, the cities where careers keep us away from our loved ones. Isn't this what we wanted? Isn't this what prosperity promised us? Yes, so we can have our CAKE and eat it too.

The potential for theatre is limitless; getting people together in a room to share a live experience and tell each other stories is the oldest trick in the book. Why not share knowledge and acknowledge the impossibility of life, the reasons things are the way they are, that they don't have to be that way, that we choose those things?

Jonathan Seinen

NEWFOUNDLAND DIASPORA

It's February in Toronto. Not March in Fort McMurray or April in Calgary. It's what you'd call cold, but it's not dry. It's the dry that'll kill you. Crawl up your leg through layers of cotton and fleece and settle deep into the bone, dry cold. It remembers you. That was then, Northern nights without Northern lights. Just lots of cold, searching people happy for a car they've remembered to plug in overnight and a place to drive it and a few dreams. And five Canadian theatre-types out to say something relevant.

This is now, Southwestern Ontario. Snowing probably. The five theatre-types have reached a milestone. Having displayed their art in various western settings, the thoughts and feelings and sayings and looks and sound bites and manifestos that are "the show" are put up on the Toronto stage.

It's a milestone for a lot of reasons. First, this is Theatre Passe Muraille, where the Canadian Collective Experience was and is realized, theatrically and otherwise. Second, the show's got a three week run so we can really find a groove that only comes from a residency, where the band can relax from the woes of the road and get into a good groove, jammin'. Not to mention this is where Codco first found their groove, and for a Newfoundlander who's geographically and ideologically (somewhat) on the fringes, this is St. Peter's. Particularly with this play.

One of the rock's notable native daughters recently wrote that in the past many of us have only been able to fully articulate the feelings around the complex beauty of "home" when we're "not home." To know it is to love it and to love it is to leave it and to leave it makes for good material.

Or it's perspective. That's it, perspective.

In the cold, dry north, that perspective came gently and slowly into focus, in the mouths of the ex-pats in the Newfoundlander club, the dusty pickups with the flag in the window, the lines of memory in the faces of people in line at the grocery store. A little story began to emerge, one about "home" that I'd known my whole life but never told myself. Not like this. It was teased out and came to its various levels of fruition over two years to wind up on the Toronto stage, with the walls that talk, that tell you you've got something relevant to say, that say, "That's right, yes, I see." Newfoundlanders came. Men, women, children, singles, doubles, and yes even triples came. Journalists and friend's parents and seeing-eye dogs and theatre types came. Conversation and new understanding came.

That's it, perspective.

Greg Gale

I'M DOWNSTAIRS AND I LOVE YOU

I have been putting off writing this. And I wasn't sure why. At first I thought it was because I've been bouncing from one project to the next, switching gears like a child on a new ten-speed bike. But I have come to realize it's because of a sadness in me. A fear in summing this all up. Or finding the right paragraph to dazzle with. I feel all out of profound observations. This project has been my life for the last two years; I have found family, love, fear, frustration, and directing.

I have thought over what I would write for weeks, I have been pestered by emails from my father. And all I can come up with is,

I miss Fort Mac.

It is a strange thing theatre. It makes family out of people so quickly. The vulnerability, the hours, the pay—there is a point at which you are just doing it because it's family. You wouldn't put up with it if it weren't.

I grew up in the theatre. I have grown accustomed to these makeshift families that come and go. I understand the rituals. The blessed days of confidence and light in the rehearsal space. The fear and loneliness of moving into the dark theatre, losing the play, the three days of desperately trying to find it again, leading into the tech weeks of hysteria and panic. Sundays with the papers, reviews like a looming cloud. Never good enough. Destroying. Empty. Theatre was so much the norm that when I lost my mother it felt like the only thing to do was write a play about it.

That is insane.

I grew up clothed in stories of *The Farm Show*, *Paper Wheat*, *The Donnellys*. Rochdale and Passe Muraille were my Greek myths.

I spent my childhood counting the fucks in Andrew Moodie's *Riot*. I grew up watching my father direct with his laughter and go home with his fear. My adolescence was spent at openings and closings. Complicated gifts being wrapped and ripped apart again and again each night.

Then I went to the National Theatre School for writing. I discovered my voice and how to breathe properly.

I had my play produced. I acted in my own play, gave interviews, talked to schools. I learned to be liked and disliked and how to care and how brave caring about something is.

And I was done. I had had it. I was ready to say goodbye to theatre. I was ready for something new. I was tired, bone tired of the audiences, of the endless trains of new actors, of the caring and caring and feeling empty at the end of a run. I was done. Not in a peaceful way, but in a let me get the farthest I can from this world way.

And then I was asked to do the Fort Mac Show and I almost said no. But in the end I decided I would go but just to learn and, yes, make a play—but it would be somebody else's play. A play I could walk away from, I would assist and then be on my way.

And so I went.

I wrote the following in my diary in the first week of our first trip.

***

I am in the Wild West. It is cold, thirty-five below, forty-six on site. It is lonely, two women to thirty men, or at least it feels that way. And it's oily. People from all over the world have come to the Mecca of money, shame, contradictions, and extremes, all to slip and slide.

Nothing is simple. Truth the slipperiest thing of all.

There is a sense from the workers here; that they are just away, that when they are working it is not real time. So this small Outpost Town is filled with young male zombies. Just getting through it. The mantra here is

Get what you want and get out.

We are staying in an unfurnished condo. I sleep in the living room on a giant air mattress. We eat on a carpeted floor. We have one key, so we all have to leave together, come together—we are together all the time. If you want to go downstairs you must text someone inside to pick you up. *I'm downstairs and I love you* is what I write for fear of freezing to death outside. I spend my afternoons after rehearsal wandering the mall in a daze, just trying to digest, delude, decipher my surroundings. Be alone. And warm. I drink a giant A&W Root Beer every day, I pay on debit. Ninety-nine cents. I wink at burly men buying pizza pops and toilet paper in bulk.

I think and think and think then head out for a drink.

We rehearse everyday and then a break and then research and then go out for nine dollar Guinness pints. Or I do. They all drink blonder beer. But I am thirsty for something thick. I guzzle down the Guinness like I am chugging oil. Right before we came here, I went to dye my hair back to brown, but they screwed up and now it's black. Just like oil. Just like the Guinness. Just like the time.

These are dark times. I met a young non-union rig pig who had been living in the bush—or as he said, "hell for four years"—who wasn't going to leave until he had enough money, which will be never. He lives in a camp. He clocked one hundred hours last week and then got drunk alone in his room. He wanted to dance to bad country music with me.

What could I say?

His hands were callused; his breath smelled like sawdust. I don't know how to dance to country. So I just rocked, shocked at the roughness of his large hands in mine. Not an actor's hands … I felt like sobbing, my entire body ached from the despair in his clutch. I had to stop.

I said.

"I don't dance to country. I like rap."

He said he had two thousand rap songs on his iPod.

I pretended to be impressed.

What could I say?

I have nightmares of getting stuck under the wheels of giant trucks and babies being taken apart and put back together wrong.

We are all hooked on oil. And right now I can hear the dealer's heartbeat.

I am at my grand intervention.

It is hard to be a part of. I go to sleep drowning in metaphors. I wake up dizzy not quite knowing which direction is up.

I have no idea how this play will turn out, two more weeks of Fort Mac and I will have drunk every bar in town to the ground and danced to a bad country song with every man. And then Edmonton and then a Calgary run of this show. Oh god.

I am full on it all, gorging on people and facts; with my every smile I am having a tiny nervous breakdown.

***

We did make a play and I could not walk away. I had walked into something that changed me. Forever. We went back, and we did this play again and again. In Vancouver and Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton, and Fort McMurray again. I stage managed, directed, sat and typed each actor's dialogue in the hallway of the Epcore Theatre. I saw almost every single show. I did a show for the blind; my voice coming through tiny ear pieces explaining everything that was happening on stage.

I acted in the show when Georgina could not do a performance. I shopped for costumes. I designed the lights in hotel conference rooms, in auditoriums, in a half hour. This show is in my blood; I have breathed it for two years. I feel in love with theatre again through filling each part. I felt the banal and the magic of show business like I had just discovered it for the first time. The Fort Mac show saved my theatre life. So like everyone who goes up there, I got my piece—but it is not enough.

Because I miss Fort Mac

Something about living so close to the earth's destruction is almost easier than living in Toronto. Away from it you forget what is happening, you get caught up in your own dramas and cell phone bills. I felt scared there and with that fear I felt alive. I felt a fight, a fight for earth and for the people who live on it. I felt compassion for all of us, trying to have our bit. Get our life in. I didn't feel like we deserved the Armageddon, but I did feel like I was staring it in the face.

I was scared of writing this piece because when I was there I saw something greater than what I could get out of it and what I could say about it. It was a reflection of humanity, of this earth, and of the pain of living in this world. I don't know how to live with it all. I don't know how to put a bow on this experience. And I can't find an ending. Because I am just at the beginning, creating the Fort Mac show was the first chapter in a lifelong struggle, the struggle of our time: What to do when it's all used up?

Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman

March 14, 2009
Keyano College Rehearsal Hall
Fort McMurray

March 19-21, 2009
Living Room Playhouse
Edmonton

March 24-28, 2009
Motel, Epcor Centre for the Arts
Calgary

September 18-19, 2009
Keyano Recital Theatre
Fort McMurray

October 3, 2009
Cameron House
Toronto

October 15, 2009
Kailish Mital Theatre, Carlton University
Ottawa

November 5-14, 2009
Living Room Playhouse
Edmonton

November 19-28, 2009
Motel, Epcor Centre for the Arts
Calgary

July 30, 2010
Vancouver East Cultural Centre (The CULTCH)
Vancouver

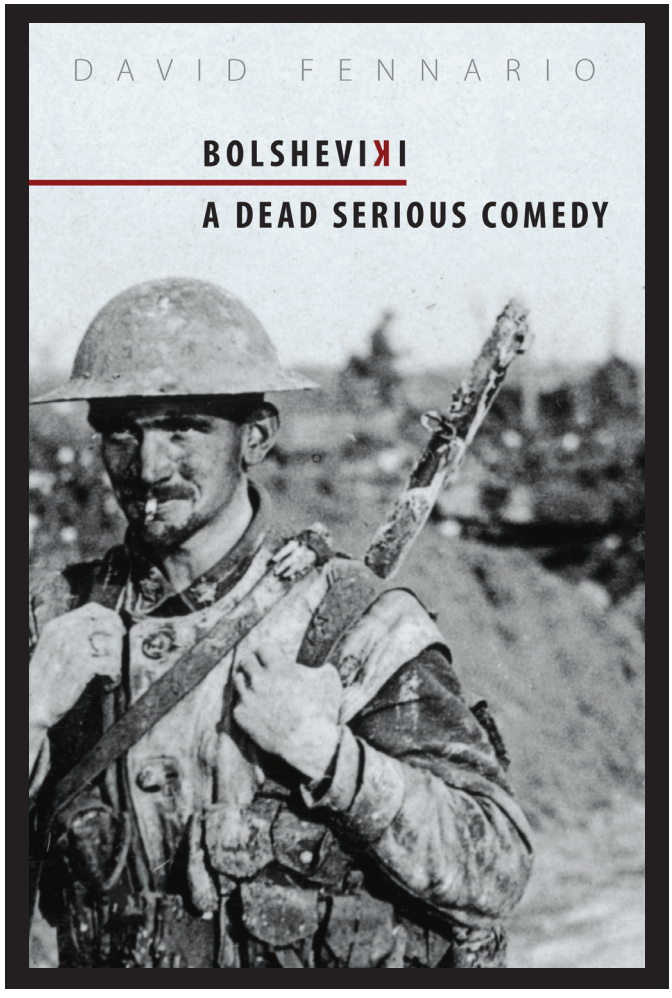
August 6-8, 2010
Athabasca Room, Stonebridge Hotel
Fort McMurray

February 3-26, 2011
Theatre Passe Muraille
Toronto

Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show
by Architect Theatre
Co-Created and Directed by **Charlotte Corbeil-Coleman**
Co-Created and Performed by **Greg Gale, Jonathan Seinen** and **Georgina Beaty**
Co-Created by **Layne Coleman**

Excerpt

BY DAVID FENNARIO



Yah … Bosha-viki … that's what they called us when we came back after the war and found ourselves on the streets outta work and started rioting cause we're pissed off … yah sure…pissed off after all that bullshit mr.face on the hundred dollar bill that Prime Minister there that Robert Borden promised us … gonna do this for us, gonna do that, make the whole wide world better for all of us by getting rid of the … Kaiser? … was that the bad guy or was it Kitchener?? …

Yah, Kaiser – Ooo – spike on the helmet – Ooo – spikes on that moustache – Ooo – he made a good bad guy – Kaiser – ooo … and that other guy-Ku-Ku-KKitchener … *Singing K-K-Katy tune* … on the p-p-p-poster with the f-f-f-finger …

Pointing

… 'You-You-You and You? … England Expects All of Youse? … To Do Your-uh-Double D-d-d-duty Overtime Anytime Sometime – or somewhere like that' …

But uh not everybody went for it … I mean the peasoups here in Quebec? … they don't go for that 'God Save the King stuff-Mange la marde' … ostie …

But uh all the maudit blokes down in the Point? … we're already all signing up to march in the big parades in these brand new uniforms and brand new 303's on our shoulders … brand new boots spit and polish … 'Heros of the night,we'd rather fuck than fight' …

Even though I did ask myself … why would ya wanna kill somebody ya don't even know in somewhere called Germany when ya never even been off the Island of Montreal? …

Christ we only went uptown once a year for the Saint Patrick's Day parade …

But hey, everybody and everything in a goddamn suit and tie,the educated people,yah educated people all telling us that we're all in this together boys doing the best we can for everybody boys altogether boys – God King and Country boys … and … make the world safe for … safe for? … for? … yah … Dem-oc-cracy … Democracy boys cause …

Sings in a drunkard's drawl

'Sorry Joe I got to go
I got a job to do
Was advertised in ninety-eight
If I'm not there I'll be too late '

Yah yah not that I ever gave a shit about that bullshit cause I knew it was bullshit cause anything anybody in a suit and tie tells you is bullshit but truth is I never minded the army life that much … was better than what I had … better than what I knew back in the Binnery …

That's what everyone called St. Bridget's Home for Catholic Orphans … bin de bean the Binnery cause all streets around the place in Griffintown stunk of beans for breakfast beans for lunch beans for supper … I mean at least in the army I'm getting bully beef with the collin de bin de beans and a daily tote of that Jamaican rum,navy rum,the real stuff, so thick you could pour it into your hand …

Swirls the rum in the palm of his hand

And … it stays there …

Yah, got it made I'm thinking over there in England in this training camp getting pissed as much as I can on those big pint of bitters …

Yah … mmm those British bitters – miss them – all being paid for by the guys I'm with just to hear me shoot the shit cause I can make 'em laugh …

Never laugh myself – haw ha – but they think I'm funny …

Come on Rosie give us that song there … come on Rosie and … ok so I give them one I've been doing since I was a kid … there in the Parker House with my Maw upstairs in a room banging some john for the rent and me down in the tavern top of a table five years old singing for change in French and English …

Thats why my French is so good … 'Away ti-cul fais la chanson pour ta mere twee? … '

Do the one about yer mudder … big on mothers back then … used to do this one …

Stands up with hand to heart

It's called 'Mother'

"M is for the million things she gave me – slaps in the head
O is only that she's growing old – and falling drunk down the stairs
T is for the tears she shed to save me – shut the door ya little bastard
H is for her heart as pure as gold – sold it to Honest Harry for ten bucks
E is for her eyes with lovelight shining – 40% proof
R is right and right she'll always be – inside your wallet
Put them altogether they spell?'…

… didn't ya go to school? …

Spells … MOTTHHHEEE-RRRR-RR!!"

Rosie sits back down

And they'd throw nickels, dimes, pennies, sometimes even a quarter and my Maw … how much did ya make? … dollar eighty five? … no, that's a dollar fifty cause ya see that? … you

looking? ... wack ... you looking? ... thats a slug and when they throw that at ya ya throw it back at them! ...

Throws it

And now get back up on that fucking table ... go on ya little bastard ... need two bucks for the room ...

Room 36, that's the one I remember best ... don't know why ... had two windows ...

Well, the truth of it is ... we never liked each other much ... took off on me with the Wild West show when I was ten with this bar-room guy she was banging ...

Buffalow Bill I called him ... He's the one that taught me how to do Kip-ups… Used to do kip-ups too ... ya know? ... like Charlie Chaplin does straight up from the floor? ... wrestlers do it now straight from the mat? ...

Yah-yah ... Little Beaver used to do it all the time ... must be someone out there remembers Little Beaver? ... that midget French guy wore his hair in a Mohawk? ...

Jay-sus,who am I talking to? ... buncha people from Ontario? ...

Well, wasn't much to write home to mother once we get transferred over to France where the ladies wear no pants ...

I think it was France although they called it Flanders? For some fucking reason ... ya know like in that fucking poem there? ... Yeah. 'In Flander's Fields ... where the poppies' ... uh ... come on you know the poem? ... 'where the poppies ... blow?' ... every time I dump my load? ...

Anyhow it rained all the fucking time we were marching into near that town the Alleymans blew all to shit ... Ypres yah ... nothing there but a pile of bricks they called Ypres not too far from 'mademoiselle from Armentieres' who left us all with souvenirs ... crabs and cooties ... march in there looking like this and march out looking that ...

Left

Scratches crotch with right hand

Right

Scratching head with left hand

Marching along ...

Scratching with both hands

Left ... Right ... Left ... Right ...

'Heros of the night rather fuck than fight' ...

Salutes officer while scratching cooties and crabs

Yes Sir! ... Into these trenches ... That's a trench? ... looks like ditches like the kind ya dug for a sewer pipe only there was no pipe just the sewer up to the knees and ... move on – Move on – MOVE ON – on with sergeant-majors yelling out your name your name your name your name your number number number and ... shells ... whee-wump ... – keep in line keep in line ... whee-wump ... cardloads of muck in the air-pieces of duckboard ... arms and legs and ... rifle ... and a boot with fucking foot in it ... there it goes ...

Shows foot spinning in air

... Pa-a-lumpp-p ... with lots of guys tossing up that navy with the beans they had fer breakfast ... back in line back in line – number number number – into ... uh ... think it was the Battle of Loos spelt L-o-o-s ... loop de Loos with-swwiisshh-h-bullets-swish-swishhh-swiisshh and these five point niners Schh-wanging away ...

Shows the looping

Shh-Shwwanngg ... Sh-wwanngg ... .and Sh-wanngg ... and ... pp-wingg-ggggg ... ricochet ... ppwwiinngg-gggg ... bullets hitting the wire ... ppwwiinnngg-ggg and ...

Stands up and points rifle

... Ping ...

Scratchs his crotch then fires again

… Ping ...

Scratchs crotch

... Ping ...

Scratchs crotch and pulls crab out and throws it in the air and shoots it

... Ping ...

Does fist pump

... Yes!

And then listens

Woo ... woo ... woo ... what the fuck was that? ... woooo-oo ... woo-woo-woo-puppu-p ... mortars fat ... wobbin ... like a flying pig ... ... pup-pup-pup-woo-woo ... woo ... and sorta oinked on the way down ... oink-oink-oink-oink-oink ... . Wwwappp ... all those things you wish for? ... just arrived ... Wwww-wappp-pp ... 'If pigs could fly' ...

Then shhu-wheee-ett-we get the whistle-shhu-wheee-ett-It's the signal to go up over the bags ...

'Fix Bayonets-Front Rank-About Turn' ...

And the First Wave goes over ...

Takka-takka-tak ...

They don't even know what hit them ... and then the Second Wave ... Same thing ...

Takka-takka-tak ...

Dead, they're all dead ...

Then Lieutenant Postlewaite – how can you forget a name like that – Postlewaite – had these rabbittty teeth – Postlewaite – no helmets in those days ... sticks up his head ... Pp ... oo ... ckk ... thats what it sound like ... pp ... oo ... cc ... kk ... whistle still in his mouth ... sshhuu-tt-t-t ... when we found his skull few months later ...

Holds up skull and points to teeth

... Hey its Posssowittt-ssttt ... tt ...

Throws skull over his shoulder

Anyhow, he falls down blub in the mud but we make it over the bags ... the Third Wave machinegun squad – the Vickers machine gun we had issued then – trained on that one – could put it together in three minutes – with Jimmy Kemson carrying the tripod – worked for the CPR – and Mitts Murphy carrying the ammo – he worked in the Grand Trunk yards – and me with the muzzle – don't work nowhere but I'm working hard now cause that muzzle weighs a fucking ton ...

Cradling the muzzle

Two canisters of water strapped to my back ... clanketty clank over the bags tripping over what's left of the guys in the First and Second Waves, into this-glu-ck-from all that rain making mud that just-glu-ck-the boots offa you ... .gluck ... not kidding ya, it took my boots off –gluu-ccckk ... in my socks ... gluu-cckk not getting nowhere soon-gluucckkk and ... Calls ... 'Hey Rosie,Rosie' ... I could hear my squad but I can't see 'em ... 'Hey Rosie-gluuu-ccckkk – trying to lift my feet – gluuccc-kkk-walking like Snoozer ... this guy from the neighbourhood with feets like Charlie Chaplin ... Gluck ...

Leans crazy to the left

Gul-luck ...

Leans crazy to the right

Gul-luck …

Leans crazy backwards

'Hey Snoozer,how's your whoozer?' ... gglluucck ... 'Come on Rosie' ... But I'm stuck trying to push forward ... 'Come on, Rosie' ... He's at the wire with wirecutters and ... schwaanng ... those five point niners ... SCHWAANNNNG ... and ... cough-coough ... where's Mitts Murphy? ... just his hands on the wire and the cutters going ...

Shows the cutters looping through the air then a frowning pause

... No,there was no cutters, nothing ... just gone ...

Recites line from sentimental melodrama

'Put a lamp in the window Mother, for your wandering boy" ...

And standing there with the muzzle weighing me down down and looking for Jimmy Kemson who's got the tripod ... where the fuck is him? ... and can't dump the water canisters need it to pour in the firing box to stop gun from overheating when its shooting six hundred rounds a minute, could give ya a hard on just feeling it go off Tack-a-tack-tac ... get right into it ... tack-tack-a-tac

Where the fuck is he? ... Yells ... Jimmy? ... ah fuck it ...

Drops muzzle

Fuck that and trying to turn-ar-rounn-dd-take the canisters off me when – whoosh-a big gghooossshh of air – concussion lifts me up like, like a Houdini ...

Shows suspension

... then drops me down next to Jimmy Kemson with big piece of his stomach blown out all over ... and at first I can't hear him,can't hear nothing but I can see he must be screaming cause his mouth is open and his eyes popped almost of his head and I'm trying to move slow and heavy with everything out of focus ... and then ... black ... am I dead? ... is this dead? ... cause if it is, it's not that bad ya know ... not feeling nothing? ...

And then ... aagghh ... I can hear him ... aagghhh ... really hurt ... and I tell him – words slurring in my mouth ... Slurs ... 'Ok, Jimmy take it easy, but – 'aggghh – it's hurting – aggghhh –'its really hurting ... 'Mommy-mommy-mommy ... mommy mommy mommy' ...

'Mom-MYYYY!' ... Fuck ... "Mom-my' ... Fuck Off

Sits down and takes a drink

Mothers ... Fuck ... 'Is that yer fadder beating yer mudder or yer mudder beating yer fadder?' ... And no, I don't know what happen to the bitch, ok? ...

I mean all the other guys in the outfit got letters and stuff from home ... me I got nothing but one card from Winnipeg saying 'dear son I'm in a jam ... send me ten bucks soon as you can' ... Course I didn't send her the ten but I kept the card so when the guys bug me about getting no mail? ... 'Yah I got mail' ...

Holds up card

Yah I got mail ... Never mind what it says ... None of yer fucking business ...

Looks at card

Dear son ... son of a bitch ...

Knock knock

... Hey recorder still listening ? ... How about a nice warm glass of milk and cookies? ...

Knock knock

Mom-my ... mom-my ... mom-my ... Aw fuck, just, shut up, shut up and Jimmy he says ... 'Rosie, No, No, don't go ... no' ... But I'm going and he's screaming and screaming ... no no no ... ok ok ... but shut up or theyll hear ... ok ok ... No no no ... gotta go Jimmy ... no ... and ... still screaming ... 'I'm gonna die Rosie, I'm gonna die' ... .

Yah you're gonna die alright, that's for fucking sure ...

Jimmy Kemson ... Born on Fortune Street in the Point ... Fortune Street ... and ya figure thats got to be lucky being born on a street with a name like that ... but ... that's not how it works ... don't ever wish me good luck ... ever ...

And mommy mommy mommy and fuck-fuck ... fuck ... just shut up ok? ... shut up ... you know what I did? ... Took a sock off my foot and shoved it down his mouth ... choking and waving his arms ...

Waves his arm

Til the arms stop waving ...

Drops his arms

And ... he gets quiet ...

Takes a breath

Ummmm ... .Ya know, and of all the things I saw in that war, it's that sock sticking out of Jimmy's mouth that still comes back at me in my dreams ... No no. I don't remember it like a dream, it just comes on me from something I heard or seen and I'm in it again ... I'm right there ...

What do you call 'em? ... hal ... hal ... le ... nations ... fifty, sixty years later? ...

... I don't know why I told you that ... never told anybody that ...

Recites a soldier's song adding the tune here and there

Are ya lookin' for the battalion
I'll tell ya where they are
Tell ya where they are
Tell ya ... where they are
Are ya looking for the battalion
I know just where they are
Eddie Jackson Joe McCoy
Michael Egan Billy Foy
They're hanging ... they're hanging
Hanging by their balls
they don't feel too good at all
hanging on the old barb wire.

Bolsheviki: A Dead Serious Comedy
IS PUBLISHED BY TALONBOOKS (FORTHCOMING SPRING 2012).

Bolsheviki **PREMIERED AT MONTREAL'S INFINITHEATRE IN NOVEMBER 2010. DIRECTOR: GUY SPRUNG.**

DAVID FENNARIO IS CURRENTLY WORKING WITH DIRECTOR DONALD MCMANUS ON A PRODUCTION OF *Bolsheviki: A Dead Serious Comedy* **AT EMORY COLLEGE, ATLANTA, GEORGIA, JANUARY 2012.**

© Robert Etcheverry. France Roland and Maude Laurendeau (obscured) in *Sexy béton*.

DISPATCH

Reality as Poetic Narrative

I have come to love and accept the fact that documentary theatre is an inherently perplexing genre. In every instance that I have produced it, in every forum where I have spoken about it, indeed every time I utter its name in public, people react with the kind of bemused paralysis that often follows the proposal of an oxymoron. The question they invariably are drawn to formulate in awkward response is: How can a play *be* a documentary?

It is a question that has delighted and tortured me since I started writing documentary plays twelve years ago, and the very reason why I am still addicted to creating them. The theatre is an artificial space—one in which actor and audience mutually consent to having false relationships. Actors often pretend that the audience is not watching them, the audience accepts that the performers are other than who they really are, and the real place and time that they occupy together are discarded so that both can enjoy the imaginary realm of the play. Why the hell, people ask me, would anyone want to subvert such a fantastic arena by proposing to "get real"?

Indeed, the documentary dramatist would seem to be the ultimate theatrical killjoy—interrupting the audience's eager suspension of disbelief with constant reminders about reality. Because documentary plays usually tell stories about the here and now, they often propose a conscious awareness of the present between audience and actor, they sometimes feature actors playing only themselves, and generally they feature a playing space that represents little more than the stage itself.

And yet despite all these efforts, a staged representation of the real can never be complete, because ultimately the live performance of anything—fact or fiction—is always a reproduction of moments that are pre-ordained. Documentary filmmakers can creep up on their subjects with a camera and record spontaneous moments, but the stage actor's lines have always been repeated beforehand, and the dramatist's portrait of reality is always rehearsed into a preconceived form.

Why, then, force this mismatched marriage of theatre and documentary?

Because I believe that within the artifice of theatre, reality can shed its fascist pragmatism and become a magical and malleable dimension again. When real material is coaxed onto the stage and arranged respectfully within the basic laws of dramaturgy (i.e., portraying a palpable conflict, characters with clear objectives, and a plot that keeps its audience wondering what will happen next), it suddenly reveals its underlying poetry and can be perceived as a narrative. And the moment audiences recognize that the real world around them operates much like a poetic narrative, I believe they become conscious of their power to affect and change it.

The best example I can provide of this type of audience empowerment is my most recent experience producing the play *Sexy béton*. The central real event within *Sexy béton*'s documentary story is the collapse of a bridge called "de la Concorde." The word "concorde" means harmony, and yet when this bridge collapsed, it caused us to start arguing. We argued about why the bridge collapsed, who was to blame, and who should ultimately assume responsibility. Throughout this contentious and sometimes vicious public dialogue, we became deaf to the irony of our condition. The bridge collapse opened up a space in our urban jungle to reflect upon our failed public pathways — including our staunch refusal to communicate from either side of vast and growing ideological chasms. And yet what did we do with that space? We filled it with every manner of discord.

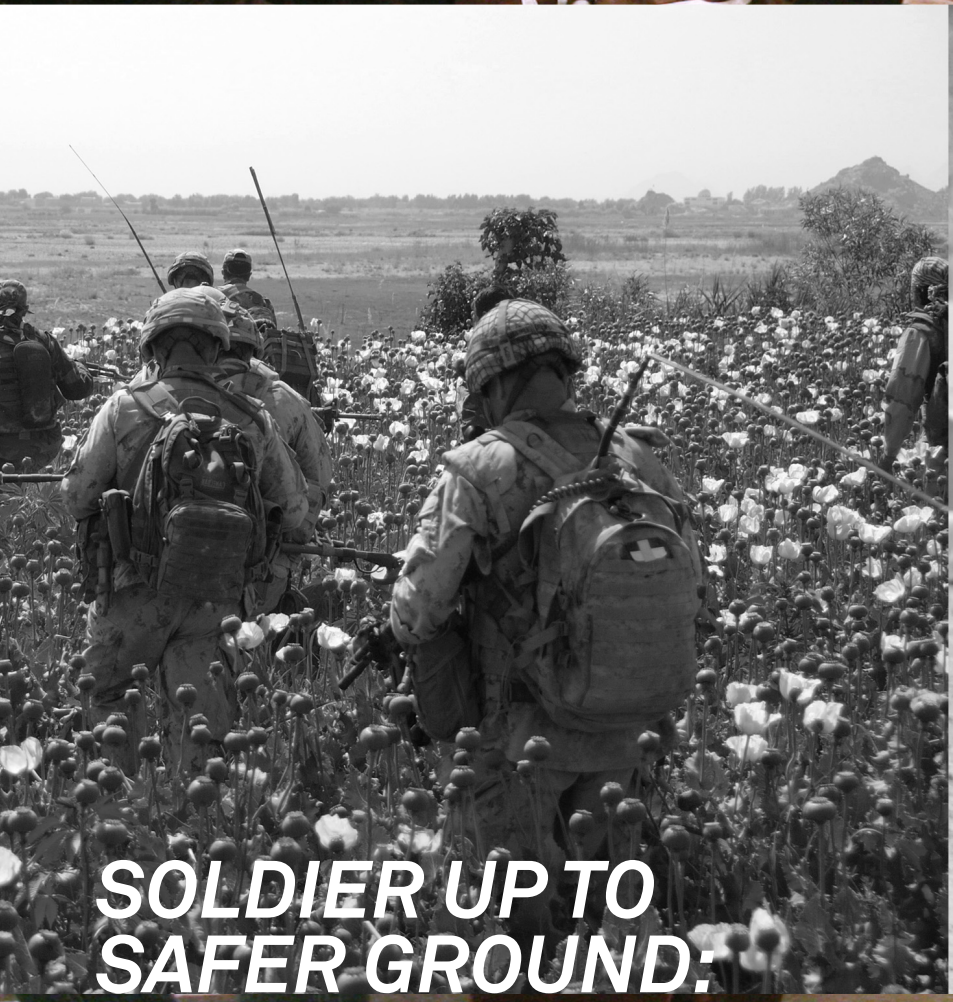
When the stage artists who collaborated on *Sexy béton* shared this story with local audiences last year, the collective response was fascinating to me. I kept hearing versions of one stunned question after the play: How could this have happened? How did we *let* this happen?

What I realize today is that it is our very relationship to the concept of reality that allows horrible things to "happen" every day—precisely because we believe that reality just *happens* instead of recognizing it as a narrative that we determine and that *we* therefore have the power to *shape*.

If this idea seems a little abstract, I recommend that the next time you read a newspaper, you try this little experiment. Find an article that really irks you, one that exposes a problem that just keeps reiterating itself. Tear the story out of the newspaper and place it on a table. Then imagine that table as a stage. What is happening on that stage?

Now it is your story too.

Annabel Soutar



SOLDIER UP TO SAFER GROUND: *AN INTRA-CULTURAL CONVERSATION*

BY JAMES FORSYTHE

COLOUR photo © Colin Corneau (Brandon Sun)
Karen Kempe, Carolyn Gwyer, Tim Machin, Jared Weir, Altair Vincent
B&W photos used by permission of Combat Cam

In September of 2006 I began my introduction to theatre class at Brandon University much as I have for the last twenty years: with the students sharing five minute "stories" of an event that was so pivotal as to forever change their lives. A mild mannered, somewhat quiet young man started with a determined and sombre tone telling us that less than a month previously he had been serving as a soldier in Afghanistan. He let us know that he didn't want any of the usual stupid questions like, "Did you shoot anyone?" but that he couldn't ignore the fact that his tour of duty around Kandahar had been the most pivotal event in his life. And as we listened in stunned silence, the so-called war on terror left the television news and entered our studio.

It is very hard to get away from the military presence in Brandon, Manitoba. Canadian Forces Base Shilo has been twenty minutes down the road east of town seemingly forever. But when the 2nd Battalion of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry moved from Winnipeg to Shilo in 2004, they, along with the 1st Regiment of the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery, created a sizable impact on our community of 50,000 on the banks of the Assiniboine River. Imagine if the population of your town suddenly increased by 10 per cent and most of the newcomers wore combat boots. The move also coincided with the transition, in some minds, of our military from peacekeepers to combat forces, first in the former Yugoslavia and then in Afghanistan. Difficult as well not to notice the armoured vehicles with the large "Student Driver" signs motoring down the main street in front of the university, or the men and women in fatigues waiting beside me at 3:30 on weekdays to pick up our children from school. Approximately a third of the military personnel live in Brandon as opposed to "on base," and this includes the majority of the officer ranks.

Yet this was a part of my community that I knew absolutely nothing about. I did not know what these particular neighbours actually did, let alone why they did it. There was a separation or "solitudes" within our community, and I determined that I and Pet Projects Theatre[1] would try and bridge the gap through "verbatim" theatre[2]—the theatrical presentation of first person narratives. The stories of verbatim are obtained mostly from interviews, but they may also be taken from other primary sources, such as emails, blogs, journals, letters, and transcripts of instant messages.

The Canadian "mission" in Afghanistan is a contentious issue, with most polls indicating that a majority of Canadians have serious misgivings (VisionCritical). By using verbatim theatre I would be able to justify or allow unpopular points of view to be heard because the script would be composed of the actual words of the interviews. These would not be the playwright's opinions or politics, but those of the interviewees themselves. The audience may disagree with some of the opinions expressed, but they nevertheless remain the truth for the original speaker. For this reason, verbatim provides a clearer window onto a subject. My fellow Brandonites would "see" the production not as a work of fiction but as a conversation they were passively participating in.

My previous experience in creating verbatim theatre was limited but significant in that it directly involved military issues. I was fortunate to have been in the cast of Edmonton's Northern Light Theatre production of an adaptation of Barry Broadfoot's *Six War Years*,[3] in which Artistic Director Scott Swann staged selections of what Broadfoot describes as moving "across Canada asking strangers and friends and friend's friends the one main question: 'What did you do during the war?' As simple as that" (viii). In the early 1990s I used selections of Broadfoot's work to mount my own adaptation with the students of Brandon University. A script, no matter how well written, is still an actor's tool to be used to create a character. *Six War Years* appeared to my students to be just such a tool until they spent hours in conversation with Brandon veterans.

Once my students heard the first-hand accounts directly from the veterans, it became not so much about creating character as honouring the words and the people who spoke them. It was my first taste of the theatrical power of the "authentic voices" of verbatim theatre. The first-person connection created a heightened sense of responsibility in the actors.

Taking my cue from my recently returned student, I planned to introduce the extended family of the Canadian military based in Shilo to their fellow citizens by offering to tell their stories for them. However, in this case I did not have an existing published collection. I would have to mine that ore for myself. I needed to create "*The Afghanistan Years*." Using Broadfoot's work as a template, I set out to interview soldiers and their families to get the human story beyond the news clips—the culmination of which would be the play *Soldier Up!*

I had no idea how hard it was going to be to accomplish and how many frustrations and obstacles I would have to overcome to assemble the raw material of the interviews. In the eyes of many in the military, they have been ill-served by both media and academe. By introducing myself as from the university, I was automatically assumed to be a philosophically committed pacifist who would find it difficult to separate soldier from mission. Previous experience sharing stories had left the military with a sense of being too often ridiculed and stereotyped. Initial overtures on my part were often challenged by questions like, "You're not from the CBC are you?" (Anonymous).[4]

As I started to work on *Soldier Up*, I sent out a press release and called in favours from contacts in the local media who kindly wrote background articles on the project, which led to a feature on CBC that went national. The base paper, *The Shilo Stag*, published an article I submitted stating my desire to interview veterans and their families with the goal of creating a play emphasizing that it would be "in their own words." I contacted the Military Family Resource Centre, which provided support and suggestions for additional sources of interviews. I explored every possible connection that anyone I met had with soldiers.

The real breakthrough came with the aid of Karen, my wife and cofounder of Pet Projects Theatre. She was teaching in a local school that received a visit from CFB Shilo's Public Affairs Officer. At the end of his presentation, she introduced herself and the project and he agreed to meet with me. We talked about moving to Brandon, having kids the same age, and moving homes and schools frequently when growing up. I seemed to have passed muster. If the Major said it was okay, then it was. My phone calls started to be answered.

I started with my student soldier. He agreed to be my first interview subject and provided not only his own perspective but also gave me a much needed primer on the workings of both the Canadian military in Afghanistan but also the physical geography of the countryside around Kandahar and the airfield (KAF) itself. He drew maps and sketched the base layout, providing visual descriptions that allowed me to ask more knowledgeable questions in my subsequent interviews. Perhaps his greatest contribution to the project was a complete transcript of his email correspondence with his family and friends over the course of his tour. His inside knowledge and experience gave me the vocabulary I needed to put soldiers and their families at ease and not ask the "usual stupid questions" he had previously warned my class against. His mother and grandmother graciously gave me interviews, which led to contacts with the larger military family outside of those in uniform.

The next step was largely the snowball effect of word of mouth. Every interview led to another. Each subsequent meeting built on a growing reputation of trust built on the recommendations of my previous interviewees. One particular woman stands out in my mind: she lived just off base about twenty minutes outside of Brandon and I drove out to meet her after she had "heard" I was looking for family stories and called my office. We chatted for about twenty minutes and then she got up and went into the other room, bringing back a binder that contained every email, letter, and MSN transcript between her and her husband during this and a previous tour to Afghanistan. It was personal, intimate, and very humbling to receive.

> **My Dearest Love, My life, My other half,**
>
> This is the hardest letter to write. You are gone in less than 48 hours and it breaks my heart to see you go but yet my heart is full of pride all at the same time. You have such a high sense of duty that sometimes I wish your duty to self and country would take a back seat to your family but then again if that were the case you wouldn't be who you are today or the man that I love so dearly!
>
> There is no 100% guarantee that you're coming home and that alone makes me want to cry but of course I need to shut up, suck it up and soldier on. I can't imagine what you are thinking besides wanting to get over to Afghanistan. I know your heart also aches leaving our children and me home. You know we can do this tour and do just fine. (Anonymous 2008)

I began to feel that not only were a brave few anxious that I tell the truth as they knew it, but that I had a great responsibility to not let them down. She had not been well at that time and we kept our first meeting short. I left promising to return the material to her after I had copied what I needed. Normally returning troops go through a transition process at the end of a tour that involves some downtime to blow off steam in Cyprus. An exception to this rule is in the event of a medical emergency. When I phoned to set up a time two weeks later to return her binder, she said, "My husband just got home today. My doctor wanted to see him. Why don't you come out right now and meet him?" In half an hour I was sitting across from her husband on a Monday afternoon learning that he had left a Forward Operating Base outside of Kandahar the previous Thursday. I got the immediacy of his experiences unfiltered by time and the luxury of forethought.

> Where now it is like if they start shooting bullets, we will level the area and kind of pick up the pieces after it is done. They don't stand a chance. They still try once in a while but it doesn't work for them.

and

> The Canadian public seems to think that what we are doing is too dangerous. Or we shouldn't be involved, it is too dangerous, lives are being lost. About 99 percent of the guys that go over volunteer to go and they know full well that that could happen. So, for someone back home to say well oh, it is too dangerous. Well, it is not your life that you are risking. It is not something we are forced to do, we choose to do this. So for someone to say that, well, yeah okay, what do you know. You aren't a part of it, you aren't there, you are not actively doing anything to change the world. Joe Canadian public guy is working 9 to 5 trying to change the cupboards in his kitchen or something, I don't know. But what is he doing to change the world. That is what a soldier is doing. We are volunteering to do that. We aren't forced to go over. That's what we do. (Anonymous 2008)

After transcribing and editing the interviews down into a script format, keeping only what I hoped to be important and dramatically viable, I had three hours of material, half of which was painfully excised to create the working script. As I assembled the final script for *Soldier Up*, themes started to appear to identify subject headings I could use to build a script. I use Carol S. Pearson's version of the heroic journey with its division into preparation, journey, and return in my scene study classes. For the military stories this facilitated sections on joining up, training, deployment, battle, and coming home. This allowed me to create the equivalent of scenes or acts, giving the piece a structure and a sense of dramatic journey or shape. We added original music with lyrics based on poems submitted by soldiers to both frame the narrative and provide transitions between sections. I used the following poem to establish that soldiers were very aware of the war's effect on those left behind.

Agonizing.
It's the waiting that is the hardest part.
I am every wife, every mother,
every sweetheart, every brother,
every sister, every father,
every cousin, aunt and uncle.
I'm your average Canadian:
ignorant in my bliss, content in my distractions
they are my sons, my friends,
mentors, comrades and all I do is wait.
(Anonymous 2007)

Two years after the process began, *Soldier Up* went into rehearsal and opened on Remembrance Day 2008 at the J.R.C. Evans Theatre in Brandon. It was well received and had a profound emotional effect on many of the interviewees, who despite the guarantee of anonymity leapt up onto the stage after the curtain call to introduce themselves to those who played them. The woman who had given me her binder and made her husband talk to me three days after he had left Afghanistan watched quietly until the scene in which I had staged an MSN conversation of theirs as a dialogue, where the husband and wife could see each other but not touch. In the audience, he reached out and took her hand. Afterwards, most of my interviewees just said, "You got it."

But it did tell the story of Canada's mission in Afghanistan from only one point of view. The military family, at least the members willing to talk to me, had a uniform belief in the worthiness and honour of the mission. Annabel Soutar, artistic director of Porte Parole Theatre in Montreal, says, "You should take the raw material of the interviews and let a theme come to you as if by osmosis from the page. You cannot force your own views and biases onto the material." In the case of *Soldier Up*, the theme was, as the title suggests, decidedly supportive of the mission, if somewhat less enthusiastic about its execution. This was the theme that emerged from the material. This was the theme that the director and actors brought to life. As I stated at the start of rehearsals to the cast, I did not believe that my views on the mission were relevant and I would prefer if they kept theirs to themselves. All I wanted was for them to honour the material and not comment on it. Verbatim is someone else's truth, and as an actor you have to insure that nothing is filtering any truth you don't agree with.

Armed combat in the name of a state is an issue that gives rise to strong opinions. These views are not easily swayed. My two years of research, my contact with the military, and the negative reaction of many of my peers both in the theatre and on campus from the outset of this project also braced me for the difficulties of the goal of opening a window to the soldier's world to my neighbours. Most people approach this topic from a deeply held ideological view that often precludes the possibility of serious discussion. If my aim was to build a bridge between the military and the non-military communities, I was going to have to involve non-military voices. To expand the window into our role in Afghanistan beyond the ideological it was clear to me that I needed the opinions of the other community in Canada with an equal stake in our nation's presence in Afghanistan: Afghan Canadians. I wanted to present on stage the voices of the military juxtaposed with those of the people they believe they were sent to protect as a way to give my audience fresh eyes.

In January of 2011 I arrived in Montreal as part of a sabbatical leave with two goals in mind. The first was to co-teach a new, interdisciplinary course in oral history and performance at Concordia University with Ted Little, a professor in the department of theatre, and Steven High, Canada Research Chair in public history. And the second was to repeat the interview process with the Afghan Canadian community of Montreal. The combined hybrid script had the working title of *Safer Ground?*

Repeating the process of creating verbatim theatre from initial concept through interviews, transcription, editing, and script preparation for the two projects has allowed me to notice patterns. Approaching each community has been equally challenging, but in preparation for Montreal I was able to apply a few observations acquired along the way: research your questions; find gateways; build trust; and persevere.

Prior to my arrival in Montreal I canvassed the internet seeking the essential keys to any verbatim project, the "gateways." In Montreal the project would not have gotten started without the tremendous assistance of Glynis Williams of Action Refugee Montreal, Makai Aref of the Afghan Women's Association, and Kiran Omar, president of the board of Teesri Duniya Theatre, who connected me with Montreal's large Ismaili community. These gateways allowed community members to feel less apprehensive about meeting me. As with the public affairs officer from Shilo, I was "vouched for" by

a trusted leader in the community allowing a greater chance of creating the necessary "snowball" effect of one interview leading to more.

It is difficult to say why members of a subject community come to trust the interviewer in any verbatim project. I received a great deal of help through the recommendations of my gateways. I was well prepared in my research. At the risk of self-flattery, I seem to be able to make my interviewees relax through laughter, and I have been told I am an encouraging listener. I found that the apprehension and fear of impending crises are often bracketed in human memory by positive emotions such as hope and the triumph of survival. In both sets of interviews, laughter was an important catalyst for the truth.

First interviews are important to get the positive word of mouth going. In Montreal I got a text response from a Concordia student responding to a "cold call" email I had sent to the McGill Muslim student group. A friend had passed it on to her. Initial questions were casual, introductory, and fully involved both of us equally in conversation. I began with a search for commonality; in this case she was a university student at Concordia and I had just arrived to teach there. This allowed me an opportunity to share my own reflections, permitting the interview to start off as a conversation. She was nervous at the beginning, but as the interview progressed it was clear that she was proud of her heritage and of the challenges facing the world her parents had taken her away from.

JF: When I think about my family coming here I think of them as being smart and brave. How do you think of your parents, of the decision they made?

M: I think it was very very very brave of them. My dad, for example, he really let go of a lot of things, thinking that we would be a lot more educated in Canada. But he really let go of his profession. Now when I go to school and study hard I always think of my parents. My mom didn't finish her school. She had to do three years of medicine to be a doctor, and she couldn't because of the war. And my dad studied medicine and worked full time at the same time because his dad passed away and he had to take care of his family, sisters. Now that I think of it, we complain so much. (Anonymous)

The goal was to get "stories," which meant longer uninterrupted answers needed to be prompted by appropriately leading questions. The questions also reassured the interviewee that there was no preconceived idea of a "right" answer.

JF: The Canadian military has been in Afghanistan for even longer than that. […] most of them that I have talked to, they think that their intentions are to do good, to help the people of Afghanistan. In your opinion is that feeling shared by your peers or your family or yourself?

M: I have a friend whose brother is in the army in Afghanistan actually. And, when he went to Afghanistan, she was very sad and I think, We are all humans, right? The families in Canada probably feel, I don't know how they feel, they probably think, oh my god, I am not going to see my son or daughter again. You know what I mean. I don't think that someone who is willing to die for a cause is doing it for that reason, but at the same time, I don't know if I completely agree with them being there. Not only for Afghanistan but also for them. (Anonymous 2011)

While it is important to be flexible and allow for improvisation in the questions, I believe the only way to remain open to all viewpoints is to ask the same questions every time. Questions that encourage memories to flow following a natural narrative time line of before, during, and after seemed to make it easier for both the shadow and the light sides of events to be recalled. "So and then what happened?" was a constant refrain to encourage and promote greater detail. My intention to appear to be subjectively on their side regardless of what opinions were being offered was constant. As Catherine Kohler Riessman of Boston University puts it, "my approach to narrative analysis does not assume objectivity but, instead, positionality and subjectivity. The perspectives of both narrator and analyst can come into view […] truths rather than the truth of personal narrative is the meaningful semantic distinction" (704).

My subjectivity comes into play subconsciously in my editing process and my final selection of pieces to be included on stage. Each individual story presents its own truth. Comments from Afghans on the subject of whether troop withdrawal should be complete and immediate elicited a variety of views sometimes from the same person in the same interview. My job is to honour and present that "truth" even if it is contradicted by another "truth" later from another "character." I choose to present as many truths as I can, but that too is a subjective choice. I sensed that the contradiction in the wishes of Afghans regarding the presence of foreign troops—a sense of "we want you to leave but not until its safe"—was a truth I wanted to present.

I knew I had enough raw material when repetition in the answers became noticeable. Mason notes, "Qualitative samples must be large enough to assure that most or all of the perceptions that might be important are uncovered, but at the same time if the sample is too large data becomes repetitive and, eventually, superfluous" (n.p.). Daniel Bertaux posited a saturation point in qualitative research, where no new information is to be gained by increasing the quantity of the interviews, stating that "fifteen is the smallest acceptable sample size in qualitative research" (98). However, I found that this saturation point of new information is directly related to the specificity of the community. Fifteen is a small sample of soldiers but I would argue that it is more than enough examples of the views of female partners of serving soldiers living off base or university-age Ismailis on the island of Montreal. The challenge is to establish demographic goals and seek out as wide a variety of subjects as possible. It was important to me to talk to officers and enlisted soldiers of both genders and to respect the gender of the source of the stories in performance. In *Safer Ground* the challenge was not only to find balance of age and gender, but to also represent the various ethnic and religious communities that make up the multicultural face of Afghanistan.

At the time of writing this article, I have reached the first stage of script compilation for *Safer Ground*. Edited transcripts of all material I think might be useful to the final script have been assembled in piles on a table in my office under subject heading

cards. Dozens of hours of audio have become over one hundred individual stories. Significant further culling will be required as the Afghan stories are combined with selections from *Soldier Up* to create a combination of reasonable length called *Safer Ground*. In the case of the Afghan Canadians, the stories seemed to divide themselves into why and what they left, the sprint out of Afghanistan, the marathon of refugee camps and immigration, and reflections on the mission and the future.

The edited set of monologues must now be theatricalized with the addition of a design and directorial context that will form the "vessel" that houses the words. *Six War Years* was set in a British pub and a sandbagged bunker; *Soldier Up* went back and forth from a backyard deck to a mud-walled road. And both productions benefited to different degrees from the addition of music and choreography.

Concurrent with my Afghan interviews, the students in the oral history and performance class at Concordia were profoundly troubled by the ethical questions that arise when you theatricalize a conversation. Many students felt they simply did not have the moral right to turn a human being they had talked with into a "character." But appropriating a person's stories and turning them into a character are integral to theatre. If the volunteer interviewees are fully aware of the goals of the project and have signed a release, they have, in my opinion, given permission to use their words as you see fit. During her visit to Concordia University iconic Canadian playwright Linda Griffiths responded to my description of my time in Montreal, "Ah yes, you collect stories and then you mess with them." By mess with them, I presume she meant that the dictionary meaning of the word "verbatim" doesn't really apply if the words are edited, taken out of context, or juxtaposed with other material to create an unintended, by the interviewee, dramatic effect.

I agree that verbatim is not a completely accurate word: perhaps theatrical creative non-fiction? I respect the words given to me during the interviews and my intention is to honour the agreement I made with the volunteers, who gave generously of their time. But in the end I am creating a play and not a recitation of transcribed interviews. My belief based on my experience is that people want their stories told, that they tell me things they want others to hear. There is no question about my right to use these words—if there was, no one would ever tell another person's story. I prefer the advice from Soutar: "Sometimes you just have to put the stories on their feet and trust in your own talent and artistic integrity to honour the material." Otherwise the stories remain unheard and frozen. Artists in all forms and disciplines interpret the life they see around them.

My final reflective observation is taken from my journal dated February 1, 2011, although it applies to every day of the verbatim process: "Don't give up, if the story was easy to tell you wouldn't need to tell it." Canada's role will change from combat to training in the summer of 2011, but the need for the stories to be told will always be there—because Afghanistan will never forget our presence and some will never forgive us for leaving too soon.

Three Women's Voices from *Safer Ground*

A) They beat him when they took him outside the bus. He was thirteen years old and he was beaten for me. He was beaten on his hands and feet with a lash because I didn't wear a Burka that day. We were crossing Jalalabad on our way to Pakistan and when they took him outside I got so scared because that was the beginning of the Taliban so I was scared that they might kill him so I started yelling at them and abusing them. I said whatever I could say and I said, "Don't take my brother!" I think I made it worse for him, they beat him more. But I still remember the face of that Talib. If I see him I could recognize him and if I see him today I would go after him. (Anonymous 2011)

B) Canadian soldiers are going to leave. The Taliban is coming back. This is not new Taliban. Talib is Talib. Not new Talib, same old Talib. This Taliban has the same idea, same mentality. I don't think that they have any change. That they are new or evolved. So Kandahar will be Taliban, the whole, the whole country, I think will be because I mean, how would you know that they get to Kandahar but not to Kabul? It's the same thing. No, they get to be everywhere. (Anonymous 2011)

C) But countries like Afghanistan suddenly all these countries, America, Canada, England, have put a lot of help into this country. People ask the question why? And they don't have a lot of information about the situation and what is going on. They say, no. Just pull out.

Just leave them as they are.

Just let them deal with their own problems, and let them alone.

Just wash your hands. (Anonymous 2011)

NOTES

1 Pet Projects Theatre was founded in 2005 by Karen and James Forsythe with a mandate to produce quality theatre while giving back financially to community organizations, which have included the Brandon YWCA Women's Shelter, Westman Immigration Services, The Wounded Warriors Fund, and the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba.

2 Verbatim theatre was coined by Derek Paget in 1987 to describe theatrical performances based on interview transcripts (High).

3 *Six War Years 1939-1945*, adapted and directed by Scott Swan, presented by Northern Light Theatre at the Edmonton Art Gallery Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta, 1979.

4 All anonymous quotations are taken from interviews, phone conversations, and email correspondence with the author.

WORKS CITED

Bertaux, Daniel. "Stories as Clues to Sociological Understanding: The Bakers of Paris." *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*. Ed. Paul Thompson, with Natasha Burchardt. London: Pluto Press, 1982. 93-110

Broadfoot, Barry. *Six War Years 1939-1945: Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad*. Markham: Paperjacks Ltd., 1976.

Griffiths, Linda. Personal conversation. 13 January 2011.

High, Steven. "From Oral History to Verbatum Theatre: A Reflection." Blog. 23 January 2011. Oral History and Performance Seminar, 1 June 2011. Web.

Kohler Reissman, Catherine. "Analysis of Personal Narratives." *Handbook of Interview Research*, Ed. J.F. Gubrium and J.A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2002. 695-710.

Mason, Mark. "Sample Size and Saturation in PhD Studies Using Qualitative Interviews." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11.3 (2010). Web.

Pearson, Carol. *Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform the World*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.

Soutar, Annabel. Personal interview. 26 January 2011.

VisionCritical. "Britons and Canadians Oppose Afghan War." Angus Reid Public Opinion. 3 March 2011. Web.

A CHALLENGE TO DESPAIR:
THE GAZA MONO-LOGUES IN NEW YORK CITY

BY ISABELLE ZUFFEREY BOULTON

After the war I started thinking, why are we like that, out of the whole world? They took our land and threw us out of our homes … And because we are defending ourselves, all this happens to us? There's no water… no electricity … no phones … no petrol … What are we to the world, aren't we human?
— Sujoud Abu Hussein, age 15, *The Gaza Mono-Logues*, 30

Thirty-three young men and women from Gaza believed that they have a voice other than the screams of fear and the moans of frustration.
— Iman Aoun, Program

Even in this age, when the play-by-play of entire revolutions is broadcast on Twitter, when we are closer to war than ever, watching *The Gaza Mono-Logues* felt like plunging deeply into the thick of the action. Performing this play in thirteen different languages at the UN headquarters in New York City on November 29, 2010, twenty-two actors from eighteen different countries provided a compelling argument for peace on the annual International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People.

An initiative of the Ramallah-based Ashtar Theater, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* is an episodic play made up of monologues written by thirty-three Gazan adolescents ranging in age from 13 to 18. It addresses the Israeli offensive on Gaza, code-named Operation Cast Lead, which lasted from December 27, 2008, to January 18, 2009. The performance of *The Gaza Mono-Logues* at the UN significantly coincided with the anniversary of General Assembly Resolution 181—which in 1947 partitioned the Mandate of Palestine into two States, one Jewish, the other Arab.

At the time of the New York performance, the Palestinian Authority was expected to complete its two-year agenda of readiness for statehood by August 2011, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had pledged to seek a framework agreement on permanent status by September 2011. The time was ripe for this play, a powerful testimony of the writers' experience of this 22-day war, and a strong argument for the resilience of the human spirit. But its authors were unable to travel to the UN to deliver their message in person due to the blockade imposed since 2007 on the Gaza Strip, an area of 360 square kilometres inhabited by 1.6 million people, mostly Palestinian Arabs. Thus, an international cast performed in their place, in true solidarity.

There were a total of three performances of *The Gaza Mono-Logues* in New York City in November 2010: two at the UN and one sold-out show at the LaMaMa Experimental Theater. The audience's excitement was palpable before the performances, and they were eager to discuss the play as soon as the lights came up. At LaMaMa, the theatrical event began as actors performing their monologue in their native language led small groups of audience members into the performance space. This personal attention is representative of what the monologues, with their simplicity, candidness, and direct address to the audience, achieve. From the unique demands of its creation to the play as a final product touring the world, *The Gaza Mono-Logues*, through its staging and theatrical form, calls its international audience to action and heals some psychological wounds of war.

The co-founder and artistic director of Ashtar Theatre, Iman Aoun, conceived the original project of *The Gaza Mono-Logues* in order "to advocate for the rights and needs of our children in Gaza who are the innocent victims of this ongoing conflict" and to "draw attention to the continuous deprivation and humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip." The project began with the support of UNICEF in 2009. Ashtar's representative in Gaza, Ali Abu Yassine, worked with a combination of drama training, Theater of the Oppressed, and creative writing. After seven months of this work, Nadel Sha'ath, the project's psychologist in Gaza, measured a significant psychological improvement in the participants. He explains, "The psychological therapeutic aspect for the children is one of the most important objectives that *The Gaza Mono-Logues* project sought to fulfill" (Program).

At the beginning of the project, many of the writers described suffering from insomnia and recurring nightmares since the war, while others still lived in constant fear. Sha'ath used the regulation of their hours of sleep and changes in their academic performance as indicators of their stability. The monologues document this progression: One young man asks, "[I]s what's happening to me normal, or am I sick?" (27). "After the war I had a breakdown […] a hand was extended to me through the theatre; a rubber ring that pulled me out from under the wave" (14). Another monologue states, "[W]ithout the theatre I would have gone crazy" (20). Participation in the project had concrete and measurable psychological benefits.

Ashtar specializes in a form of Theater of the Oppressed called Forum Theater, developed by Augusto Boal. Forum Theater is performed in an unfinished state: a social or political problem is described and staged, and participants must find a solution to it. There is no separation between audience and performers; everyone intervenes in the dramatic action. This teaches the participants to become active agents for change. The use of Forum Theater in this process gave the youths an alternative to violent retaliation by helping them assert their voices.

The stories exchanged during these workshops became *The Gaza Mono-Logues*, which premiered in Gaza on October 17, 2010. Thanks to Ashtar's international network of partner theaters, more than 1500 young people in fifty cities in thirty countries also performed the monologues that very same day. As Fateema Abu Hashem writes in the play, "acting is important and allows me to relay the picture of the suffering of my country and society to the world" (34). Though these youths cannot leave Gaza, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* serves as their bridge to the rest of the Palestinian community in the West Bank, and to the world.

In adapting the play for the New York productions, directors Aoun and Shauna Kanter (artistic director of VOICETheatre in New York City) created a deeply moving piece. The staging was simple and the set minimal, consisting only of some debris gathered on the risers along the sides of the space. Apart from the actors' voices in song and the popping of balloons—mimicking the sound of explosions—there were no sound effects. Thus the text was truly the focus, and the performers' complete commitment to their circumstances ignited the audience's imagination. But the most striking moment was not staged: during one monologue, another actress listening on stage burst into tears. She had been so moved by the words that she had broken character.

The monologues are snapshots of individual lives disrupted by war. All

The audience, converted into witness and judge through the mechanics of documentary theater, actually stands accused. In a brilliant twist, we are invited to judge our own failure to act.

describe close encounters with death, and friends' or family members' deaths, but they also convey their authors' unique concerns and personalities. They vary widely in tone and style. Some texts are clearly unpolished pieces of writing, with choppy narratives, while others are strangely poetic and evocative: for example,

> [His friends] went out running like butterflies, flying off the ground […] A car of wanted men was driving along Yarmouk street, and the butterflies were near the car. The butterflies didn't know that this car would be the fire that would burn them. (11)

Many stand out with unexpected moments of humor, providing much-needed comic relief. Muhammad Qasem wonders at the absurdity of his family's reactions during an attack. His grandmother's first priority is to find her false teeth: "she was afraid that when she died people would find out she had no teeth … like they don't know already!" Then "the house was full of smoke but my father lit a cigarette and smoked … as if we needed more smoke!" Finally, all their windows but one break in the explosion, and on his uncle's advice, his father decides to break it too (37).

Given the youthfulness of the writers, these are essentially coming-of-age stories in extraordinarily difficult circumstances. The monologues derive their power from placing these accounts in the context of individual lives, thereby putting unique faces to the statistics of war. Indeed, the characters are not anonymous victims of a faraway war; they are one of us, and the bare staging highlighted this.

There was no seating at LaMaMa, and as the audience stood in the space before the show, performers weaved their way among them. This minimized the separation between audience and actors, and fostered our identification with the characters as they took the stage. The monologue form also produces a privileged relationship between audience and characters. The separation of the two roots of the word in the title of the play—mono-logues—draws attention to the performers' act of "speaking alone." While dialogue is closed and self-contained, monologue is open, lacking a partner onstage. It implicitly includes the audience as a

substitute partner for the performer, and draws the audience into the action.

And yet the theatrical genre of the *Mono-Logues* also distances the audience from the action in order to optimize their emotional response. As a finished play, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* qualifies as "documentary theater," defined by German writer Peter Weiss as a theater that "collects authentic material and presents it 'adjusted in form but not in content'" (Carlson 428). Since actual experience of a violent event would presumably leave witnesses fearing for their own lives rather than watching the events unfold, the action of observing is flawed. Through its form, documentary theater accentuates key moments and creates a distance between the audience and the original event.

Consequently, the audience members become ideal witnesses, more emotionally receptive than they would be if placed in the actual events. In his book *The Necessity of Theater*, philosopher Paul Woodruff likens this theatrical genre to a trial: it gives the writers a voice, and presents their words as testimonies and depositions. It also calls the audience to witness and determine a verdict. By performing an informal justice, it serves the victims' need for justice (Woodruff 27-28).

Operation Cast Lead was especially devastating to civilians. According to the World Health Organization, 1380 Palestinians were killed in the attacks, including 431 children. At least 5380 were wounded, 1872 of which were children. Amnesty International reports that more Palestinians were killed and more properties destroyed in this campaign than in any previous Israeli offensive. Victims died from the use of high-precision weapons shot at short range, bombardments from combat aircrafts, targeted artillery shells and mortars, highly incendiary white phosphorus, and the obstruction of access to medical care for those wounded and trapped.

Gazans were never more isolated than during operation Cast Lead. Amnesty International's report on the offensive notes that "for several weeks prior to start of the Operation, the Israeli army refused to allow into Gaza independent observers, journalists, international human rights monitors and humanitarian workers." Conflicting accounts of events are symptomatic of war, but the absence of media skews the historical record in favor of the dominant force, and silences the victims. *The Gaza Mono-Logues'* most basic achievement is creating a record of what truly happened from the points of view of these thirty-three adolescents.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'history' as a "relation of incidents ([…] professedly true)." The monologues, as true stories, could be considered historical accounts. The slight editing they underwent in their dramatization is akin to the work of a historian, who has the freedom to select and arrange information. But history cannot exist in a vacuum; it needs witnesses. This is precisely what the theatrical form provides in this instance. Moreover, the ability to record its history is critical to a culture's very existence. Woodruff states, "a minimal human culture […] must have a memory" (14). As the play continues to broadcast this moment in Gaza's history to the world, it implicitly asserts the legitimacy of the Palestinian culture.

Despite functioning as a history, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* maintains its focus on the personal, and its content is never zealously and explicitly political. It is clear that the young people are aware of the political context in which they live, and that a specific political discourse influences their outlook. For instance, the majority of them refer to victims of the conflict as "martyrs," and they write of "the occupation," "the Israeli army," "political party fanaticism," "Palestinian division," "a big Hamas leader," etc. (29). But these are simply the circumstance of their world. Furthermore, some passages seem to have been cut from the New York performances—for example, "In seconds, a Palestinian rocket launcher was erected in the area and in less than one second the Israeli planes started bombing it" (42). This directorial choice clarifies the central message of the play, which does not deal with the internal politics of the conflict.

In fact, the writers are decrying the lack of action and the powerlessness of the international community in this conflict. "The tragedy is that things keep getting worse, and the biggest tragedy is that there's nothing to stop that happening" (8). "The crisis is that the whole world is watching us, as though there's nothing going on, and they're still making speeches!"(16). Before the performance at LaMaMa, the waiting audience effectively became the aggressor as some actors had to struggle past them to move through the space. The audience, converted into witness and judge through the mechanics of documentary theater, actually stands accused. In a brilliant twist, we are invited to judge our own failure to act. What could be a more effective call to action?

Of course, not all failure to act on this injustice is due to apathy. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is very complex and has lasted over sixty years. Providing a solution lies beyond the scope of the average person, and many who would want to help feel powerless to do so. *The Gaza Mono-Logues* and Ashtar's encouragement to the world to continue performing it ultimately provide a means for political action. Producing the play and acting in it are simple ways to raise awareness, create dialogue, and attempt to affect public opinion. This has clearly resonated with many, as the play's afterlife has been very successful and there are ongoing productions in Europe and the Middle East.

However, there are no plans for further US performances. Kanter believes that the fact that no major news outlets covered the New York shows limited the project. But it seems that this did not dampen enthusiasm for the piece. Audience members eager to stage local productions of the piece have approached both Kanter and Serge Bakalian, managing director of the Golden Thread Theater in San Francisco and producer of the San Francisco production of the *Mono-Logues*. But apart from one student production of the piece at San Francisco's Mercy High School in collaboration with Bakalian's theatre company in December 2010, there have been no more productions of the play.

This is unfortunate, as American performances could spur concrete and immediate change. Speaking at the UN on November 29, 2010, Judith Leblanc, member of the National Steering Committee of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation, stated that public opinion in the United States is a decisive factor in ending

the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She explained that the Obama Administration continued to interfere with the UN's diplomatic role and implementation of resolutions. "The powerful, moneyed pro-Israel lobby remains one of the strongest influences on United States' foreign policy […] [which] will only be challenged by internationally organized, sustained

© Isabelle Zufferey Boulton/ *The Gaza Monologues* at La MaMa Theatre, NYC

civil society pressure." Changes in public opinion, for example, instigated initiatives to divest from companies that do business in Israel. In the US, a country with immense diplomatic weight, a civil society moved to action has powerful economic tools to pressure its government and Israel.

But *The Gaza Mono-Logues* has the potential to have a greater impact still. The play could engage a true dialogue between Israeli and Palestinians. Kanter, who is Jewish, would like to direct a production with Jewish kids. She notes that it is unfortunate that the piece has not yet been performed with an Israeli cast, given that she believes that the majority of young Israelis today are moderate and support peace and the creation of a state of Palestine.

The Gaza Mono-Logues is a dynamic catalyst for social change. During this play's creation, exercises in Forum Theater helped its writers cope with the trauma of war, and empowered them to reclaim their voices. In performances around the world, the form of documentary theater turned these seemingly innocent personal stories of life during war into an indictment of the impotence of the international community and a call to action to its audiences. In addition to its powerful message, *The Gaza Mono-Logues* is also a medium for political action, and Ashtar enthusiastically welcomes new global partners interested in producing the play. Most importantly, the play's format emphasizes the act of witnessing, which fulfills both a need for justice and a need for history in this oppressed community. The trial form of documentary theatre provides an informal justice where no formal justice exists, while the play as a historical record ultimately reclaims the legitimacy of Palestinian culture.

Finally the play serves as a memorial to the children who died during operation Cast Lead and to all victims of children's rights abuses, such as thirteen-year-old Hamza al-Khateed, brutally tortured and killed by Syria security forces during the recent uprising.

We have yet to see the effect that the Arab Spring will have on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but some change is already underway. On May 28, 2011, the BBC reported that Egypt had eased restrictions on the Rafah border crossing, one of its border crossings with Gaza. Although trade is still not allowed, Palestinians carrying an ID card will be able to cross freely for the first time in four years. Perhaps there is hope that sometime in the near future *The Gaza Mono-Logues* will be but a historical document.

WORKS CITED

Amnesty International. "Israel/Gaza Operation 'Cast Lead': 22 Days of Death and Destruction." London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009. Web.

Ashtar Theatre. *The Gaza Mono-Logues: Youth from Gaza Tell Their Personal Stories about War and Siege.* Nicosia, Cyprus: Rimal Publications, 2010.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed.* Trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre.* [Expanded edition] Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Donnison, Jon. "Egypt Eases Blockade at Gaza's Rafah Border." BBC Online. 28 May 2011. Web.

Kanter, Shauna. Personal interview. 24 May 2011.

Macleod, Hugh, and Annasofie Flamand. "Tortured and Killed: Hamza Al-Khateeb, Age 13-Features-Al Jazeera English." *Al Jazeera English.* 31 May 2011. Web.

"Program." *The Gaza Mono-Logues. The Gaza Monologues.* Ashtar Theatre. Web.

United Nations. Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. "Observance of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People — CEIRPP Special Meeting/Summaries of Statements — Press Release." United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine. New York: UN Department of Public Information, 29 November 2010. Web.

Woodruff, Paul. *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

World Health Organization. "Health Situation in Gaza: 4 February 2009." *World Health Organization.* Web.

DISPATCH

Ssh! Listen ...

We invited the audience to enter a softly lit room of rich colour, where Persian carpets covered the floors and luxurious pillows offered space to recline. We served tea and Persian cookies. Those who preferred more conventional Western seating could choose one of the chairs lining the walls. People reclined and sat, some chatted, others enjoyed the ambient recorded music of Iranian-Canadian master santur player Amir Amiri. Once the room was full and the doors closed, the lights were dimmed to near darkness, and then—we *listened*.

First, the sounds of a mother's voice, handling pots and pans and feeding and talking to her infant son. Then the voice of the son, now a man, explaining to us how very close he was to his mother.

So began *It Is Only Sound That Remains*, a sound theatre performance held April 12, 2011, in a theatre studio at Concordia University as part of the artist-in-residence program of the Life Stories Montreal project. The title is from a poem by Persian poet Forugh Farrokhzad. The poem was performed live by spoken word artist Moe Clark.

Those first voices of the play decribed above were of Iranian-Montrealer photojournalist Ziba Kazemi and her son, Stephan. Soon other voices followed, including that of the narrator, artist-in-residence Shahrzad Arshadi, also a Montreal-based photographer and the creative force behind the performance. This layering of words, archival sound recordings, and Persian music conveyed the remarkable story of how Shahrzad came to consider Ziba a close friend in the years following her brutal death in 2003 at the hands of Iranian authorities in Tehran.

How does one become close friends with someone one has never met in life? It is this paradox that Arshadi shares with us, breaking from her visual work as a photographer and documentary filmmaker to use only sound and space. Arshadi gained access to Ziba's private writings and recordings when she was asked to interpret Farsi for Ziba's son, Stephan, who wanted to speak with his grandmother in Iran at the time of his mother's death.

Thus it was mainly through reading and listening that Arshadi connected with this unknown woman. This relationship grew and deepened as Ziba's words and life entered Shahrzad's imagination and engaged her heart. This is the profound experience that Arshadi seeks to transmit through *It Is Only Sound That Remains*. By creating an intimate yet communally shared space—by asking us to close our eyes and listen, to imagine this woman and her life—Arshadi allows us to become very close to a remarkable woman. We are touched by the small details of her private life, can relate to them, and feel that we would have liked to have known her.

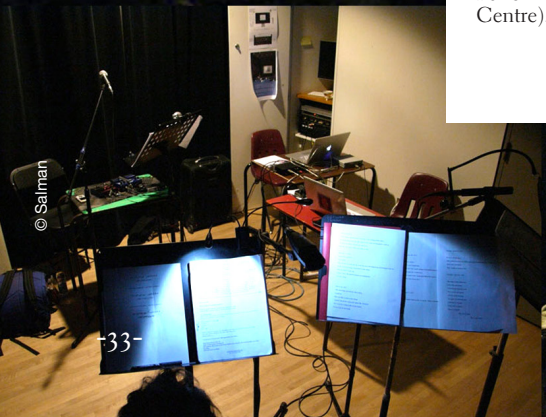
Many of us remember hearing about Kazemi's death when this story made the headlines. *It Is Only Sound That Remains* allows the audience to meet Ziba through the voices of her loved ones, and to hear Ziba's own words and voice: through recordings made by Kazemi herself and through excerpts from her private journals and letters performed by actors. This is not the story of the public figure, the tragic victim of human rights violations, the rebellious photographer. Rather, it is the story of a woman, a mother, a friend, a lover, a person deeply interested in the world around her. A human being, in short, with a precious, private life like every one of us. Yet someone whose spirit was so strong that she continues to inspire, even after her death.

Caroline Künzle

It Is Only Sound That Remains. Ziba performed live by Yassaman Ameri. Ziba's son, Stephan Kazemi (archival recordings and pre-recorded interview). Ali Hashemi, Ziba's ex-husband, played by Javad Sahebi. Forugh Farrokhzad's poem *It Is Only Sound That Remains* performed live in English translation by Moe Clark. Jerome, Ziba's lover, played by Neal Santamaria (pre-recorded). Narration performed live by Shahrzad Arshadi

Stage management and sound cues, Caroline Künzle.
Sound technician, Jawad Chaaban
Performances: April 12, 2011 (Department of Theatre, Concordia University); September 22 and 29, 2011 (Montreal Baha'i Centre).

WWW.SHAHRZADARSHADI.COM/SOUNDTHEATER/
OR WRITE TO ITISONLYSOUND@SHAHRZADARSHADI.COM



© Salman

Headlines Theatre's Us and Them (the inquiry): A Return to Basics

BY SETH SOULSTEIN

Throughout October and November of 2010, Vancouver's Headlines Theatre rolled out twenty events across seventeen venues, all with the same title: *Us and Them (the Inquiry)*. One would normally say that a theatre company "performed" a certain number of events as part of their run, but Headlines is no typical theatre company, and the major share of what could be called "performing" at any of these events was done not by members of Headlines, but by whomever chose to attend the event.

After twenty-nine years of theatre-making on an incredibly diverse array of topics, the Us and Them project, beginning with *Us and Them (the inquiry)* and culminating in *Us and Them (the play)*, scheduled for the fall of 2011, is a return to basics for Headlines. It serves as a manifestation of their core mission: exploring the boundaries between what could be called "us" and what could be called "them."

Headlines Theatre practices what co-founder and Artistic Director David Diamond has termed Theatre for Living (TFL). The methods, exercises, and techniques of TFL are almost all directly taken from, or are mutated versions of, those laid out by Augusto Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* and subsequent works. However, there is one key distinction in the theory behind Headlines' methodology: where Boal, in his Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), drew the line between "oppressed" people and their "oppressors," TFL offers no such dichotomy, and views the social existence of all humanity as being part of a spectrum; in other words, all part of the same (dysfunctional) system.

In Diamond's *Theatre for Living: The Art and Science of Community-Based Dialogue*, the foundational text for the TFL form, he calls for a transformation in thinking, away from a "mechanistic" (22) model of life. In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal supported his new form with a thorough analysis of an evolutionary model of drama, from pre-Aristotelian dithyrambs to the Brechtian response to Hegelian poetics. Diamond chooses a different angle, taking Boal's theatrical approach as a given and instead focusing on systemic views of human interaction.

For Diamond, who sees scientific paradigms as the core sources of inspiration for human behaviour, the Cartesian concept of a mind-body duality has had a devastating effect. Exploitation of the environment, of

wildlife, and of fellow human beings has been made possible because of a common world view that allows us to see ourselves as separate from everything else. We are able to turn a blind eye to struggling, impoverished people because we do not consider ourselves to be connected to them in any way. Diamond maintains that "[i]t also became possible, in this mechanistic model, to create an artificial construct: the separation of oppressor and oppressed" (22).

Oppression and the progressive/activist response to it—including Boal's—are stuck spinning their wheels within the same unhealthy paradigm. To be clear, Diamond does not in the slightest see his theory as a repudiation of Boal's work, but rather as a further adaptation: "*Theatre for Living* is an outgrowth of *Theatre of the Oppressed* in the same way that Boal's work has grown from the work of socially conscious artists before him" (24).

As Diamond often says, both in person and in his book, "oppressors of the world do not come from outer space. Living communities grow them" (38). He believes that oppression is the symptom of a dysfunctional community and not the cause of it—a fundamental departure from Boal's approach. If we define an oppressor as something that exists outside of the community he or she is oppressing, we will never be able to fully deal with our own oppression, as we would not be focusing on its root cause. This belief leads Diamond to find promise in a new scientific paradigm: systems theory.

In the foreword to *Theatre for Living*, systems theorist Fritjof Capra explains the new theory, writing that " [i]nstead of seeing the universe as a machine composed of elementary building blocks, scientists have discovered that the material world, ultimately, is a network of inseparable patterns of relationships; that the planet as a whole is a living, self-regulating system" (qtd. in Diamond 14). The whole of TFL practice, then, can fit into that phrase "self-regulating." If we are all part of that system, and the system is in some sort of dysfunctional state, then there must be something wrong with the way the system regulates itself.

As Diamond posits, "we humans are not prisoners of the structures we inhabit. Nature teaches us that structure is created by patterns of behaviour—not the other way around" (38). The structures that exist in human society to create divisions between "oppressors" and those they oppress are simply manifestations of repeated behaviors; investigate those behaviors and learn how to change them, and you may just change the structure of your society—or so the theory goes. Therefore, TFL departs from TO's emphasis on the notion that "[e]mpowerment cannot be an end unto itself" (64)—we must look beneath the mere fact of disempowerment of groups of people to the root causes of such a societal structure in the first place. Systems theorists, and therefore Diamond, call this systemic self-regulation a *feedback loop* (62). The focus of TFL is the creation of intentional feedback loops within a community, a process that Diamond refers to as *praxis*[1] (176).

The TFL praxis aims to take a community from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium in order to investigate possible new, more equitable and sustainable, sources of balance.

The three phases of praxis that a system, or in this case a community practicing TFL, must go through in order to succeed in self-transformation are *entrainment* (170), *epoché* (173), and *emergence* (168). Entrainment is simply the act of tuning oneself into a different rhythm for a period of time. Diamond uses the example of someone coming home from work and putting on relaxing music as a form of entrainment: the music helps them "entrain" themselves from the fast-paced, stressful workday rhythm to a calmer, more subdued one (170). It is for the purpose of entrainment that the Joker becomes an essential element of the TFL experience.

The Joker, a theatrical character/device originally developed by Boal, is a sort of emcee for a TO, as well as TFL, event. The name is a reference to the Joker's ability to move in and out of the staged drama, while shifting between theatrical styles and methods, like a suit-and-value-shifting joker in a deck of cards as opposed to the "court jester" image the term often evokes for people (Boal 170). Diamond also reminds us of Boal's definition of a Joker as a "'difficultator', not a 'facilitator'" (172). The Joker is meant to guide the audience through the TFL event and create a "safe place for the participants to enter disequilibrium" (172)—gently entraining the audience to a new rhythm, apart from their daily routine.

Once this safe space has been created, a TFL audience member will ideally go through epoché, which Diamond (following the lead of several neuroscientists) describes as a three-step process: "suspension of habitual thought and judgment," "conversion of attention from the exterior to the interior," and a letting go of "preconceptions and individual agendas" (174). These two first steps, entrainment and epoché, are processes intent on creating a sense of extra-daily disequilibrium—the only state from which emergence, the final step, is possible. When a living system is jolted out of its habitual behavior (entrainment/epoché), it is possible that it can begin to act in ways previously unheard of (emergence). At these forks in the road, so to speak, "the living system can emerge into new structure and/or new forms of order" (169). The TFL praxis aims to take a community from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium in order to investigate possible new, more equitable and sustainable, sources of balance. How can you know where to go without knowing where you are?

In order to get a sense, then, of where the larger Vancouver community "is" in relation to the community's distinction between an "oppressor" and an "oppressed," Headlines created the "Us and Them" series of events. The first phase, *Us and Them (the Inquiry)*, concluded at the end of 2010. Billed as a series of twenty "participatory theatre event[s]" (Håvet) in the Vancouver metropolitan area, it seemed to have as its main goal a provocation of thought and a search for a possible thematic focus to emerge from amongst the events, which would then inform the content of the 2011 *Us and Them (the play)* mainstage production.

© David Cooper / Jordan Fields and Cody Grey in "*Meth*" (2006 – 08)
© David Cooper / Janette Pink, Kevin Conway, Sandra Pronteau, Sundown Stieger in "*after homelessness…*" (2010)

Diamond chose to stage each of the events as a large-scale Rainbow of Desire workshop. A technique pioneered by Boal, Rainbow of Desire is a process whereby one person shares a story from his or her life (usually relating to a specific theme of the event/workshop), from which a very precise moment is distilled, animated, and analyzed. The event's two main characters—the protagonist of the offered story (played by him/herself) and a person with whom they have come into momentary conflict (played by a volunteer audience member)—are prompted to explore the internal conflicts going on within themselves at the moment in question. For the storyteller/protagonist, this is profound self-reflection; for the antagonist, there is a danger that the exploration can go no deeper than conjecture.

But Diamond is insistent that we not stick to the reality of the story but rather explore the reality of the metaphor, the feeling of the situation. As he reminds the audience at every event, as well as in his book, the story very quickly "*belongs to the room* and not the individual" (179). The protagonist offers a story not as a submission for group therapy, but as a symbolic representation of a conflict that many people in the room can recognize themselves taking part in. For this reason Diamond asks for three stories at the beginning of the process, allowing the audience to vote on which one they'd like to animate, based on which story resonates most deeply with the most people. The resulting drama is a collective creation with its basis in the original story. As Diamond writes, "[i]t is not a documentary truth, which captures real people in a real situation. It is a fictional truth, in which real people create and enact a symbolic representation of what they agree is their reality, and that we (the Joker included) trust the living community will see and recognize as the truth"(181).

With that in mind, audience members at Inquiry events were invited to volunteer their stories of a moment in the recent past in which they "othered" another person, or when they themselves were "othered"; in other words, when a two-person scenario became a conflict between an "us" and a "them." The stories dealt with a wide variety of situations, from an Olympic protestor whose attempts at peaceful protest turned into police confrontation to a migrant blueberry farm worker concerned with field safety getting into a conflict with the farm's owner (Rossi). On several of the evenings I attended, the chosen story was of a specific instance of familial abuse. At one event, for instance, the audience chose a story told by a sixteen-year-old boy—we'll call him Mark—who had a history of being physically abused by his mother. In the story, Mark and his mother get into an argument, from which he escapes into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him. His mother follows him in and slaps him for slamming the door. For the first time in his life, he raises his fist at her, and ends up punching a hole in the wall. In that scenario, Mark and his mother certainly aren't viewing themselves as part of the same "team," so to speak.

Whatever the specific scenario, the methodology was the same: Diamond worked with the storyteller and person playing the antagonist to find a precise moment in the scene in which the rest of the Inquiry could take place. In Mark's case, it was the instant he raised his fist at his mother—the rest of the event took place within that second of the story. Audience volunteers came up to play different conflicting fears and desires that existed in each character at that specific moment, always resulting in an even matching of three fears/desires per character.

This structure is a profound departure from Boal's original Rainbow of Desire work—Boal would never have animated the antagonist's fears and desires, choosing instead to focus only on the inner conflicts of the protagonist, which he believed were the only ones that could be changed/acted upon. A fundamental tenet of TFL, however, is that all sides of a story merit exploration, as they are all part of the same living system. "If we are trying to investigate issues that are relevant to the living community," Diamond writes, "then stopping the investigation having heard only one side of the

TO-based work, in a twenty-first-century Canadian context, seems to demand a more systems-focused approach such as TFL; the line between "oppressor" and those "oppressed" is not always clear and definite.

equation is not appropriate. This is not dialogue, it is monologue" (189).

Anyone familiar with the work of Boal understands what a bad word *monologue* is to him. This choice to animate the antagonist is textbook TFL—as was most of what was said and done at each of the Inquiry events. Reading *Theatre for Living* after having been to several of the events is like watching a behind-the-scenes exposé of *Us and Them (the inquiry)*. The introductory games, explanation of TFL, Rainbow of Desire structure, and all of their precedents in Boal's work are meticulously documented, and much of it was repeated more or less verbatim at the actual events.

Time after time at the Inquiry events, Diamond, in his role as Joker, would ask the audience if they felt they could relate to fears, desires, and impulses that stemmed from the antagonist character, and the answer was never a unanimous "no." In fact, I would say that the same proportion of audience members acknowledged an identification with the antagonist's inner conflict as with that of the protagonist—this certainly was the case with the story of Mark and his mother. TO-based work, in a twenty-first-century Canadian context, seems to demand a more systems-focused approach such as TFL; the line between "oppressor" and those "oppressed" is not always clear and definite. The same could be true for other forms of social activism/engagement in the current Canadian context.

That said, many of the organizations with which Headlines engaged during *Us and Them (the inquiry)*[2] seemed to operate on an "us and them" model of activism; a subtext of the entire series of events seemed to me to be an attempt to engage with these organizations in breaking down such dualistic paradigms, with the hope that it would inform how they go about their own work in the community. Ideally, for example, the blueberry farm worker wouldn't be the only one to leave the event with a new perspective on his interactions with the farm's owner: representatives of the Agriculture Workers Alliance, co-sponsors of that evening's event, would also reconsider how the organization frames its struggles as being "us" against "them."

Headlines has had great success in years past working with communities and community organizations on issues that are important to them, upon the organization's invitation[3]; however, *Us and Them (the inquiry)* did not seem to have unanimous success with all of the organizations it partnered with. An event at a First Nations longhouse attracted only three First Nations attendees, who were far outnumbered by members of other communities. A private-residence event that promised to be a dialogue between Jewish and Palestinian communities had only two Palestinian representatives. It is hard to have a dialogue when one party isn't even present. As Diamond notes, "one can't force empowerment on people" (55), and it is possible that while Headlines has done transformative work collaborating with community organizations on issues that are important to them, it will occasionally have a much harder time trying to engage them in a conversation about *how* they approach their issues.

If the major criticism one can have about a month-long series of events is that not enough people motivated themselves to attend it, though, that cannot be cause for much concern. The events were generally well-attended, and the response from those present was overwhelmingly positive. The Headlines staff is currently compiling the significant amount of feedback they received to include in their final report on the Inquiry, which will be used to inform the creation of *Us and Them (the play)*.

Theatre for Living is a theatrical method that adapts Theatre of the Oppressed to suit a different purpose, and in some ways a more complicated context. In *Us and Them (the inquiry)*, Headlines has chosen to strip away the additional layers of engagement that often inform their productions and focus on the core elements that inform all other issues in the community in some way. Diamond has set up TFL in opposition to the "mechanistic" model of life, and *Us and Them (the inquiry)* aims to explore exactly that model and turn a community's attention to the effects of being stuck in a dysfunctional paradigm. He closes his book by saying that "[o]ur own stories are intricately woven into the plots of others' stories … We are all actors in our universal, collective story" (280). With these series of Inquiry events, Headlines has worked to remind people of exactly that fact, starting every event with an individual story, and helping the community merge it into a new, collective one. Hopefully, if enough people recognize the value of this work, new, more holistic and healthy ways of structuring our society will emerge.

NOTES

1 Boal, in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, also focuses on praxis, though he uses the term differently. Praxis, for him, is individual action taken—in a Machiavellian sense—towards personal success/successfulness, or *virtú*.

2 Each event had at least one, and generally two, "partner organizations," which co-sponsored the event, offered something of a theme to the evening, and theoretically brought in audience members from their membership.

3 *¿Sanctuary?* in 1989, and *after homelessness* in 2009 are examples. For a complete list of past productions, visit http://www.headlinestheatre.com/pastwork.htm

WORKS CITED

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.

Diamond, David. *Theatre for Living: The Art and Science of Community-Based Dialogue*. Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2007.

Håvet, Kristen Michelle. "'Us and Them' by David Diamond more than just a play." *GranvilleOnline*. 12 November 2010. Web.

"Headlines Theatre: Theatre for Living." www.headlinestheatre.com/pastwork.htm

Rossi, Cheryl. "Us and Them Invites Audiences in on the Act." *Vancouver Courier* 12 November 2010. Web.

© David Cooper / Kayla Cardinal and Herb Varley in "*Meth*" (2006 – 08)

DISPATCH

Headlines (Canada), Ashtar (Palestine), and the Gaza Monologues

Iman Aoun, artistic director of Ashtar, and I met in 2004, in Italy, at a community development meeting organized by the Rockefeller Foundation. Edward Muallem, general director of Ashtar, and I met in 2009, in Rio de Janeiro, at a Theatre of the Oppressed conference shortly after the death of Augusto Boal. The conversations in both of these encounters were of people living in different contexts, but bonded by a desire for social justice.

When the request came from Iman to participate in the *Gaza Monologues*, the beautiful simplicity of her idea resonated with my desire to support the great work Ashtar and the people who inhabit the company are doing in Palestine. Why?

One of the phrases that Boal used many times that is also at the centre of my own Theatre for Living work is to "make the invisible visible." This is a function, I believe, of good theatre: to help us with insights into the subtexts of our own lives and the lives of those around us. Headlines is currently working on a two-year project called Us and Them. The impulse behind Us and Them is a question I have: When does humanity mature enough to recognize that there is no *them*, that there is only *us* here on this tiny blue sphere hanging in the middle of nothingness?

Us and Them and the *Gaza Monologues* fit together in my mind. Living in North America, Canada, Vancouver—Gaza seems far away. The news we get in the mainstream media is filtered through a lens through which many were still seeing the Palestinians as representing terror. I write "were still seeing" because I actually do think that the lens is shifting now, in the late spring of 2011, through various events in the Arab world, through the intransigence of the Israeli government, and through projects like the Gaza Monologues.

Headlines collaborated on the *Gaza Monologues* with three organizations in Metro Vancouver. The first was Jews for a Just Peace, with whom we did a very powerful project years earlier, bringing local Jews and Palestinians together to make plays about the effects of events in Israel and Palestine on people's lives in Vancouver. The second was Transformative Communities Project, a youth-based group in Surrey, BC, working on social justice issues. And the third was Neworld Theatre, friends in the theatre ecology in Vancouver who do innovative and socially relevant work. Between the four of us, we found local youth who wanted to participate, and all kicked in some money so we could pay honorariums and cover basic costs. We booked the popular Rhizome Café, a local justice-based gathering place that often hosts performances as a venue.

The performers were Krystal Bell, Brennen Bender, Alisha Glidden, Juan Pablo Munoz, Lili Robinson, and musician Emad Armoush. The directors, Mia Amir, David Diamond, and Aliya Griffin.

As I know was the case everywhere the project happened, the youth here were very moved by the experiences and words of the Gazan youth. The task, of course, was to work with our local youth to bring the monologues of experiences in Gaza to life in Vancouver; to find the resonating and linking images in the *Gaza Monologues* in the lives of the Metro Vancouver youth. In this way, we try to make both the "invisible" Gazan youth visible, and also the subtextual "invisible" lives of the local youth visible—and through the lived experiences, link the two. Both sets of young people become "our youth." There is no "them"—only an ever-evolving "us."

On 17 October 2010 audiences responded to this project in a great way. They packed the café. They listened intently to the monologues and were moved, I believe, not only by the words and images from Gaza, but by the theatre of these words and images flowing from young Canadian people. This was the genius of Iman's idea and it worked brilliantly.

Because of logistical and financial reasons, we were not able to send youth to New York and so did not participate in this aspect of the project. I did however subsequently do Us and Them events in Palestine in March, 2011 as part of Ashtar's Theatre of the Oppressed Festival—but that is another article.

David Diamond

NOVEMBER 12, 2011 LIVE INTERACTIVE WEBCAST
WWW.HEADLINESTHEATRE.COM

Coming into Presence: Discovering the Ethics and Aesthetics of Performing Oral Histories within the ***Montreal Life Stories*** *Project*

BY NISHA SAJNANI

On February 7, 2010, the Living Histories Ensemble (LHE), part of the larger project *Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by Genocide, War, and Other Human Rights Violations*, held a Playback Theatre performance entitled *Responding to Haiti*. As the "Conductor" (facilitator) for this performance of the LHE, I understood its purpose to be about creating a space in which we, as Montrealers, could commune in a discovery of our differing histories, memories, and proximity to the 7.0 earthquake that displaced families, along with centers of government, education, and culture, in southern Haiti on January 12, 2010. The performance generated contradictory responses among audience members and performers, echoing tensions that I believe have been present in the work of the Living Histories Ensemble and within the larger Montreal Life Stories project.

These tensions concern the representation and reception of "private" stories within public spaces, the question of whose stories are privileged, and the problem of archiving context specific, spontaneous experience. I will highlight a few moments from performance encounters with various communities over the past four years that have brought these tensions to light—experiences that helped to clarify some of the aesthetic possibilities and ethical responsibilities associated with performing oral histories.

The Montreal Life Stories Project

The Montreal Life Stories project is a five-year multidisciplinary research initiative funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) under the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program. The project's objectives include archiving 500 interviews with Montreal residents who have been displaced by mass violence, including young refugees and survivors (and their descendants) of the Holocaust, the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, and the political violence in Haiti and South Asia. The project's collaborators "hope that the act of listening intently to how these survivors speak their memories […] might contribute to the preservation of historical memory in Canada by raising questions about the long-term repercussions of crimes against humanity" (Montreal Life Stories Project).

The project is divided into seven working groups, including one committed to exploring the relationship between oral history and performance (OHP). As the Life Stories website states, the OHP group investigates how the interviews collected "can be used as the basis for performance in theatre, dance, music, installation, radio and video and the ways in which creative work can be used to bring out and link the cross-cultural similarities and differences in stories of human rights violation and trauma."

The Living Histories Ensemble

The LHE emerged from a partnership between Creative Alternatives[1]—a network of artists, activists, researchers, teachers, and therapists who play at the nexus of improvisation, creativity, and interdependence—and the Montreal Life Stories project. Over the past four years, members of the LHE have included Joliane Allaire, Florise Boyard, Emily Burkes-Nossiter, Catherine Dajczman, Bernard Fontbuté, Paul Gareau, Margarita Guitterez, Dramane Kobe, Warren Linds, Lucy Lu, Sergio Mendez, Laura Mora, Lisa Ndejuru, Chu Lynne Ng, Mira Rozenberg, Nisha Sajnani, Deborah Simon, and Alan Wong. The goal of LHE has been to facilitate collective storytelling and inquiry within communities that share historical legacies or current experiences of displacement. Towards this end, we draw on Playback Theatre (PT), which originated with Jonathan Fox and Jo Salas in 1975 (Fox *Acts*) and is entwined with practices drawn from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) and Developmental Transformations developed by David Read Johnson (2009).

Playback Theatre is rooted in oral history and performance (Fox *Acts*). Through simultaneous dramaturgy, the oral histories of audience members are immediately translated into performance by a group of people trained in the ritual and aesthetics of the PT form. The LHE has been particularly interested in situating PT as a form of generative arts-based research involving aspects of narrative and embodied, performative inquiry (Leavy) and as an approach to deep listening and dialogue. Over the course of a performance, the free association of narrative responding to narrative becomes a subtle dialectical process that reveals what we refer to in playback terminology as the "red thread"[2] of the collective.

Since this project began in 2007, LHE has performed amongst, with, and for a group of child survivors who are also educators at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Center; AGIR, which is a group composed of recent refugees and immigrants, alongside Montrealers with legal status who have been persecuted as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity; a mixed group of Montrealers as well as another group of Haitian-Canadian youth workers whose families and communities were severely affected by the earthquake in Haiti; the Rwandan-Canadian community as part of the 2011 commemoration of the 1994 genocide; an intergenerational audience of Cambodian-Canadian scholars, artists, and family members; and mixed assemblies of university and community researchers affiliated with the Montreal Life Stories project.

One Red Thread among Many

Several encounters over the course of this project have scratched at our assumptions and required us to evolve new aesthetic practices and ethical guidelines. What follows is a selection of what we've learned, interspersed with the insights of others associated with the Montreal Life Stories project. This is my accounting of the red thread of our work together thus far, and, as we exist and work as a collective, it is but one red thread among many.

To play or not to play? Do we enter the conversation or do we leave? Do we pretend "neutrality," suppress our own memories, or reveal our imperfect, culturally situated, and affected selves? What feelings can we tolerate in the open air? Can beauty save us from the crippling effects of fear?

Finding the Question

Our multi-generational ensemble is intentionally diverse in ethnicity, language, gender, and sexual orientation. Each of us carries our own historical legacy and experiences of negotiating displacement and belonging, and each has ties to the communities within which we perform. I emphasize this because we regularly draw upon our histories to locate ourselves as "insiders" to the experiences of our audiences. As Nick Rowe has noted, our assumptions and biases inform every choice we make as actors in another's story. Yet, in the traditional Playback form, the actor's associations are seldom revealed. The Conductor, Actors, and Musician presume a kind of neutrality, stepping forward to fill in the space that lingers after a "telling" with images intended to reflect another's experience. The overall effect is usually one of deep, empathic listening. However, this ritual can also make it tricky to avoid culturally reductive representations of the Other and also runs the risk of oversimplifying or foreclosing the complexity of another's experience (Sajnani, et al. "Turning"; Sajnani and Johnson).

Inspired by the project's emphasis on shared authority (Frisch), we began to experiment with permeating the boundary between the actors and the audience towards a greater sense of mutuality. We became more intentional about our approach to community engagement. When we were invited to perform for an organization—often because someone had seen a performance or heard about our work—I along with other LHE members would meet with the organization beforehand. We did this to get a sense of what they hoped for in creating a forum for collective story sharing and performance, and to determine what questions they wanted us to begin with.

For example, when preparing for the performance with the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Center (MHMC), we met with Paula Bultz and Sidney Zoltak, self-identified child survivors and educators, as well as with two staff. They decided that it was important to focus on the experience of being an educator—for two reasons. First, this was a topic seldom spoken about, and second, we know that PT is best suited to experiences that emerge in the moment: asking the audience about their experiences of the Holocaust directly would bring forth long, tightly packaged, narratives that were less conducive to the improvisational nature of our performance.

Finding the question has become a very important part of our process, as this first question to the audience influences the direction and unfolding of our collective inquiry. The stories told at the performance at the MHMC revealed that child survivors and educators live in a tension: they want to tell their stories so that future generations will know what transpired and work towards creating a culture of dignity and respect, and yet they also feel vulnerable, teary, and often exhausted with each telling. One man, Sam Shriver, spoke about how he needed to create a new word, "unbeclumecable," to represent those things he did not have words for when educating others about what he had lived through. Several also indicated that the identity of "survivor" or "child survivor" gives them a certain credibility and currency, that they argue over who has the right to claim these titles, but that it also limits how they become known to others. As Sidney put it, "one time, no one wanted to hear about what we went through […] and now, that's all they want to hear."[3] Their identities as survivors were, in Ken Gergen's words, "saturated" and did not leave room for other experiences and encounters (xiv). Sidney inhabited this role of the "survivor-educator" yet simultaneously called it, and its commodification, into question.

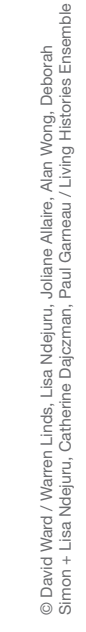
Displacing "Displacement"

The Montreal Life Stories project makes several assumptions: that those who have experienced genocide, war, and human rights violations may have also experienced displacement, and that these stories of displacement need to be archived. Yet, in almost every performance, we have heard people repeat what Sidney reminded us of: *People are not their trauma*. To interpellate people only as "displaced," "traumatized," or "survivors" limits the fullness of who they have been, who they are, and who and where they might imagine themselves to be in the future. It is perhaps for this reason that the project has emphasized the need to shift from recording testimonies to gathering more nuanced life histories:

> Too often, oral history interviews with survivors begin and end with the violence. This may tell us a great deal about what happened, but little about its long-term impact on the people interviewed. The *longue durée* of the life lived, with the requisite attention to the "before" and the "after," provides a different context in which to explore the far-reaching impact of mass violence. (High and Little)

As one Iranian-Canadian man told us during a performance for a conference on oral history, new media, and the arts (Montreal, November 2009), he did not want to see us only play back the heavy tragedy in his story but his humor and laughter—for this is what gave him the strength to endure.

Conversely, it might also be interesting to consider a Life Stories project in which we archive stories of Montrealers who have displaced others during times of war or committed human rights violations. I began thinking about this question in a conversation with Sandeep Baghwati, a multimedia artist-scholar also involved with the Life Stories project. We discussed the importance of understanding that survival usually involves acts of complicity and perpetration. These stories often remain off the record and their silence maintains a deep anxiety that plays out in several ways, including in the work of LHE. LHE member Laura Mora recently stated, "I always had a family and a safe home and did not live any major trauma in my life […] I question if I have a right to be on this stage […] If I have been displaced."



Laura's question speaks to a very important dilemma. By locating our work in the gaps, investing in archiving and staging traumatic memory, do we risk creating imaginary and opposing territories of the placed and the displaced? Do we, perhaps more urgently, deepen the divide between the two? Does our overall goal to archive the experiences of "Montrealers who have been displaced" create a boundary around suffering as something exceptional and risk what Julie Salverson has referred to as the "erotics of injury"? Or will it permit proximity, intimacy, and relationship towards what Edward Little refers to as a "culture of never again."

Entertaining Anxiety

This project creates anxiety. Our performances create uneasiness. Sometimes this anxiety and uneasiness is productive and tolerable and sometimes it is less so. When I am in the role of the Conductor, I have observed this anxiety expressed as silence, hesitation, frustration, fusion, voyeurism, humor, sadness, presence, and paralysis. I have noticed similar responses amongst audiences, actors, and musicians. LHE's musician, Paul Gareau, and actor, Warren Linds, reflect on their experiences:

> **Paul:** As a musician, I try to deepen the affect and deepen the emotion in a playback performance […] so that what is happening on stage is also found in your heart. When I played at the Rwandan performance—I played … and I couldn't. I felt stuck. I felt like I was re-traumatizing the audience and re-traumatizing myself. It was like a kind of paralysis. Each note I played … I hit my fists on the instruments. I was stuck. It was the most frightening thing I ever experienced.
>
> **Warren:** At the Holocaust center, we began with introducing ourselves and our connections to the theme and I found myself falling into a pit of my own childhood memories of my reactions to the stories of the Holocaust while growing up in a Jewish family in Saskatchewan, Canada. I found it difficult to get out of there and listen to the stories. It took time. I had to breathe…and find myself present again.[4]

Anxiety is not uncommon or extraordinary. It is a necessary barometer of discomfort that can provide warning against a real or perceived threat. However, anxiety that negatively interferes with a person's beliefs, thoughts, actions, sense of agency, and relationships over time is often a sign of significant past harm (Foa et al). The severity of the impacts of collective trauma will differ depending on the age at which the event(s) occurs, its duration, the relationship with perpetrators, the presence of prior trauma, and the absence or presence of social supports prior, during, and after the event(s) (Lubin, and Johnson). Fundamentally, trauma is relational in that it always involves the failure of a relationship of some kind and interferes with a person's sense of safety and trust, often resulting in an experience of alienation. Edward Wimberly writes about this phenomenon as the experience of being a "relational refugee"(16). Reminders of past harm can feel like real harm and can call up a desire to protect oneself. These acts of self-preservation seem to occur along a continuum of presence and absence, like Warren's feeling of disappearing or Paul's of paralysis.

> *This project creates anxiety. Our performances create uneasiness. Sometimes this anxiety and uneasiness is productive and tolerable and sometimes it is less so.*

As actors, our response to anxiety and the distress we hear in the stories shared by audience members can sometimes call up the desire to playback what we assume might be an "ideal" or emotionally tolerable response. This happened during the Rwandan commemoration performance. Lisa Ndejuru remembers

> a girl who cried in that performance … she was telling the story of a broken promise … of her mother's broken promise to her. Her mother had taken her to a safe place and promised that she would be back and she never came back … and we played something completely different. And people really loved it. I was surprised. I thought we needed to play the broken promise…and in the end, that's not what happened.[5]

We played back a scene in which daughter and mother were united in spirit even though the mother never returned. In one way, this was a betrayal of the form, as we "should" have played back the lingering grief expressed by the teller over having lost her mother. Did our own fears and wishes in that moment override our capacities to hear the deep fissures in her story and prevent us from representing this image? Probably. Yet, as Lisa indicated, the audience expressed that they wanted to see more of what we represented—images of coherence in the face of incomprehensible horror.

Audiences of interactive performances relating to genocide and other forms of mass violence may, understandably, feel some unease. They may feel like they do not have stories to tell, that they don't want to be put on the spot, or that they don't want to feel captive to another's testimony, especially if it calls up feelings of distress. Steven High, Canada Research Chair in Public History and the principal investigator for the Life Stories project, recalls a conversation we had on ethics after a performance of the LHE at the 2009 International Life Stories Day; he writes,

> I remember raising the issues of consent (I wondered how we might more effectively tell the audience at the outset that there is no obligation to share something personal) and withdrawal (could there be an intermission mid-way through the session to allow participants to escape if need be).

We have intentionally tried to weave in these opportunities for consent and permission to withdraw in each performance and understand it to be a part of good ethical practice. However, LHE has also reflected on the fact that those who live these realities do not have the option of "escaping" and that the point of this project has been to archive these stories. What is the point of digging up stories of suffering if no one can bear to hear them? I don't think it is surprising that our most consistent piece of feedback when we have performed for Life Stories researchers is a caution against emotion as well as suggestions for how affect might be better attended to or managed. This feedback sometimes seems to suggest that the presence of feelings in the room itself is troubling, and that it belongs in the private space of therapy. I realize that this is not the perspective of the project as a whole, which, as High notes, has sought to avoid a "medicalized approach" because "it would only serve to de-humanize the interviewee, as every silence or emotion would become a symptom of trauma" (n.p.). But these cautions have left me wondering if we are trying to archive these stories while simultaneously protecting ourselves from hearing them.

These questions resurfaced many times over the course of our four years. They call to mind the work of Jerome Bruner, who has written about the health of a community as being related to its capacity to hold complex stories. I believe that these capacities begin to atrophy without communal spaces that challenge us to think and feel across social realities and perspectives while at the same time encouraging relationship. This feels especially important in a project that has set out to archive the stories of people who have experienced displacement and disconnection as a result of social and political failure. I also believe, and perhaps this is Boal's influence, that we, together with our audiences, feel increasingly anxious if the perpetrators of the violence and oppression in these stories are not represented in some way. LHE member Catherine Dajczman has referred to this as finding "the shadow and the light" of every character and of each story told.

During *Responding to Haiti*, the audience responded to anything but Haiti. Caroline Kunzle of Radio Works!, another Life Stories initiative, interviewed the audience members, who talked about the importance of grounding the performance in a historical context of harm against Haiti in order to keep the event focused on what happened. They also reflected on the necessity for spaces such as the one created through playback, which could, in the words of one audience member, "help our (Montreal) community move beyond paralysis."[6]

This performance, among others, has prompted our ensemble to also wonder about how the *art* of our practice might make it easier or more tolerable to be present with suffering and anxiety when it is revealed in the stories of those gathered without moving to shore it up, change it, or avoid it. As psychologist and drama therapist David Read Johnson observed when he encountered the many gaps in the spoken narratives of war veterans, "theatre makes the absent present whereas trauma makes the present absent" (73). Breathable metaphors, when we are able to find them, permit a balance of visceral and intellectual engagement within ourselves and among our audiences in each encounter we create. Inspired by the work of Thomas Scheff, drama therapist Robert Landy has referred to this as "aesthetic distance," which he defines as "a balance of affect and cognition wherein both feeling and reflection are available" (25). And, like Warren above, we have also found that the performance of oral histories involving deep suffering calls up the need to simply breathe. Lately, my attention has been drawn to the transitions within and between the stories told during a performance and the need to leave time to respond rather than moving too quickly to the next story.

> *Breathable metaphors, when we are able to find them, permit a balance of visceral and intellectual engagement within ourselves and among our audiences in each encounter we create.*

To play or not to play? Do we enter the conversation or do we leave? Do we pretend "neutrality," suppress our own memories, or reveal our imperfect, culturally situated, and affected selves? What feelings can we tolerate in the open air? Can beauty save us from the crippling effects of fear?

A Bridge towards Interstanding

It was with such questions and experiences as these in mind that we began to evolve our aesthetic practice. We called

what emerged the "Bridge." In the Bridge, the actors reveal a moment from their own histories in relation to a story told by an audience member through an aesthetic form that looks very much like a series of revolving doors. Standing with their backs towards the audience, one actor turns clockwise to begin their improvised telling. They are "cut-off" when another actor turns to begin their narrative. This is repeated until each actor has shared two or three segments of their story. They stand still with a poetic gesture. The musician provides five beats of a drum which facilitates the actors' transition into a "fluid sculpture" (a collage of repeating phrases, sounds, and movements) that reflects aspects of the teller's narrative.

What emerges is often a surprise to the actors, the audience, and to the teller. It is an improvised and partial exchange of human experience cloaked within an aesthetic ritual. This aesthetic reflects the potential instability produced when interrupted by another's impulses as well as a simultaneous yearning towards coherence felt by both the actors and the audience as they attempt to hold onto and make sense of the partial narratives that unfold. In effect, the Bridge creates a relationship between the audience and the actors that disrupts and expands both of these roles.

In an editorial discussing the Life Stories project and our ensemble's work, Edward Little writes,

> Traditionally [in Playback Theatre], the performers work to shut down "self-talk"—to put aside their personal responses to the stories told in order to concentrate on listening deeply to the story and playing it back "objectively"[...] [T]he [Bridge] demands a more complex approach to deep listening to both self and the other. It foregrounds the potential for both positive and negative implications proceeding from personal subject positions relating to bias, assumption, and judgement. The [Bridge] requires that each member of the ensemble attempt to *meet* the teller *in* the story rather than simply playing it back—to approach, in Greenspan's words, becoming "partners in a conversation."(7)

Audiences have responded to the Bridge by saying that they felt "listened to," that it "took (them) out of their own attachment to [their] experience for a moment," that it "dimensionalized" their experience and "showed other sides of the story," and that they felt "more connected" to their own experiences and to us (the ensemble) "as people." Given the gravitas of the project's themes, it is easy to treat each story as a fragile artifact, untouchable in its sacredness. The Bridge has given LHE permission to cross the boundary between the private and public. It has invited us to come into presence with each other in our grief, laughter, shame, reluctance, denial, joy, and loss—creating, albeit imperfect, pathways towards what Warren (drawing from Taylor and Saarinen), has referred to as "interstanding."

Conducting the Conductor

The Bridge has permitted a kind of freedom to acknowledge one's self in relation to what is offered and to open up the conversation that takes place in a PT performance. In a recent performance held as part of the 2011 Commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide, we took it one step further. Rwandan LHE member Lisa was conducting a performance for an audience of friends, family, and community members. Often, the Conductor in Playback Theatre is seen as a benign and charismatic midwife, safely ushering stories onto the stage. Their authority is not questioned even though the Conductor's questions, summaries, and prompts to the audience have a direct influence over what is told and heard over the course of a performance (Sajnani and Johnson). Lisa and I had met with Callixte Kabayiza, one of the organizers of the Rwandan working group of the Life Stories project, in preparation for this performance and had decided to focus our initial inquiry on their relationship to the theme of this year's commemoration: Ma Parcours, Ma Memoire, Ma Responsabilité (my journey, my memory, my responsibility).

Lisa was quite transparent in her conducting. She explained that she loved her community and that she loved Playback and that she wanted the two to come together. At one point in the performance, the audience began to ask Lisa why she was so interested in bringing Playback into their community, why she was asking them to share their stories in this way. I was standing among my fellow playback actors and the glances passed between us all seemed to suggest the same thing: we needed to "conduct the conductor" and provide Lisa with an opportunity to reveal the hi(stories) that brought her to this moment. I, perhaps in the position of the Conductor in this paper, asked Lisa to reflect on that moment:

> It was toward the end of the performance, my brother said something about how things were running together in his head. How he knew someone who did not like to say his loved ones' names for fear of forgetting even one, and also how we needed each other as a community to be together in trying times. He was referring to the week long ritual in which we usually honor our dead and I thought maybe he was comparing this to the mass graves and the times where people did not know any details of how their loved ones died, where people were unable to have closure or mourn. He spoke of how important it was to be together. I heard his fear of actors getting the stories wrong. Instead of playing back the teller's risk, as we had done before during the performance, I asked him if he would allow me to experiment. He grudgingly allowed this. My intention was to show him that even when we get a story wrong in playback theatre, we can go back and address it. His was to indicate boundaries. I did not see them and after a while he expressed very clearly that he had indicated I should stop and I apologized, explaining that in my eagerness to share this form I did not see the boundary.
>
> That was when I felt Nisha tap me on the shoulder saying that the ensemble had consulted and thought that it might be a good time for them to conduct me so that we could all see what I was filled up with and what was driving me. I felt sheepish and saw my brother's heartfelt sigh of satisfaction (finally!! Thank you) and the expectant eyes in the audience. It seemed only fair. Surprisingly, what came out was the whole story beginning in 1990. How I had first experienced Rwanda as a young adult. How I had understood then what a refugee camp was about. How I had tried to reconcile the fact that my grandparents and

extended family lived there. That a whole generation of people my age had pledged to take arms for the right to return to Rwanda. How scared I was of the consequences. How impossible to condone continued refugee status. How difficult the irreconcilable differences were to bear. I told of how the war began and so many cousins and brothers went to fight. I told of the genocide four years later, the wordless overwhelming senselessness, to this day. I said that I believed that we were made of these stories, that we carry them everywhere we go, that they inform what we tell our children, whether we have any, and the families we make. I spoke of my own need to see and hear and name in the face of what is often unsaid. I spoke of the larger life stories project and how I now knew so much more about my own history, and so much more about what was unique to our story and what we shared with other wounded communities. And I said that playback helped in that way in showing, making seen the invisible, allowing us to name, allowing agency in some cases, closure in others, alternatives in others.[7]

Lisa emphasizes the importance of examining the stories we live by because they have such influence over our choices. However, she also highlights the element of surprise that comes with the telling. When someone chooses to give an account of their history, they do not necessarily know what will emerge or how it will affect them. Even the most nuanced life histories always involve, in the words of Homi Bhabha (1990), "ambivalent narration" (171), wherein language simultaneously contains and shuts out possible meanings, and therefore reveals itself *in medias res*.

Lisa's reflection continues:

I chose Lucy to play me because of her gift with metaphor, her fearlessness and the care she takes to stay close to the story. When Nisha asked me to cast others in the story I realized how difficult the exercise is when one does not hold a vision of it all. I did not know what I wanted to see or that I necessarily wanted to see anything. It was very emotional. I had not been aware that I had been carrying all these stories. I had simply responded to the conductor's question of what was driving me to be there in that moment with everyone else, and in a way I felt that I was completely exposed, that there was nothing else left of me.

I can see the necessity of filming our performances because on the spot I did not see the play the others offered except in flashes. Looking at the tape, exceptional gifts were offered to me. You know that when you playback a word you can see a color and when you play back a silence there is a story. All through the performance members of the audiences reflected on the process. They said that much depended on the safety of the container, that this was a tentative process, that there might be something important to explore also for children, that the form allowed for engaging with the story on another level, that art as a medium was sublime.

The performance of oral history, when given a suitable "container," renders life stories affective, sensual, and generative. The archive affords an opportunity to revisit one's story with distance and yields further insights. In Lisa's account, this was especially important to restoring the details and significance of the improvisation given how emotional she felt during the telling.

Geographies of Desire

Jonathan Fox describes Playback Theatre as "a ritual for our times." It is a space set apart where we can live our histories 'ensemble' (together) in ways that permit perspective, affect, and relationship. In the context of the Life Stories project, LHE has attempted to create a living, relational, archive of social memory. In many ways, the ensemble itself is that archive, as we have become the story carriers from several communities. Each encounter has informed the next and has returned something to our understanding, embodiment, and narration of our own histories. LHE member Lucy Lu says it best here:

Lucy: I am Chinese-Canadian. My parents were refugees after the Vietnam war. My life was filled with silences. I always think about why I do Playback. For me, being part of this project and hearing peoples' stories of deep suffering is like listening to the stories I did not hear. This came to me when we were sitting with the Cambodian community and there were grandparents, parents, and children—there were people of my generation telling their stories to each other … and they filled these silences that I had.

I will conclude this red thread with its frayed "ends"—bifurcations that mark the beginnings of our current explorations. We have begun to take notice of the similarities and differences across the stories we have heard in each community. During one our recent post-performance debriefs, we wondered if these differences in themes, preoccupations, silences, and feelings were related to the length of time that had passed since the experiences of mass violence that each community had faced.

These spoken and silent spaces in the stories we hear and do not hear create a kind of map. In addition to "factual" details such as dates, places, ages, and physical scars, these stories reveal an emotional geography—an internal landscape marked by contradicting fears, desires, choices, and the absence of choices. Each gest offered in response carries infinite possibilities and simultaneously locates and dislocates itself from this cartography. As Della Pollack has observed, "the body in action makes history answer to the contingencies and particularities […] it performs its difference *in* and *from* history and so articulates history as difference" (4).

This has led me to wonder about improvisation. With all that appears to be at stake, why improvise? To respond to each story with a play of claims made in the moment certainly carries risks—many of which I've discussed in this paper. Yet, while it forgoes the premeditated architecture of other forms of biographical theatre, such as verbatim or documentary theatre, it certainly approximates the unpredictable, liminal, and relational process of oral history. Our practice also seems to shrink the distance between researchers, actors, and audiences in ways that make our interdependence and accountability to each other palpable. There is no escaping to the anteroom to prepare a careful monologue. We are all taking some kind of risk in being together, in attempting to be responsive to one another in the moment, and this can be rewarding. As Lisa put it, "When we are together I feel unafraid."

© David Ward / Deborah Simon, Alan Wong, Lucy Lu, Joliane Allaire / *The Bridge*

NOTES

1 www.creativealternatives.co

2 The *red thread* is a term that is used in PT to describe the conversation that takes place between audience members through their stories (Fox, 1994, 1999; Hoesch, 1999).

3 Interview with Sidney Zoltak and Paula Pultz at the MHMC.

4 Quotes are taken from the LHE performance at the North American Playback Festival, Cambridge, MA, 17 June 2011.

5 Quote from the LHE performance on 17 June 2011 at the North American Playback Theatre Festival, Cambridge, MA.

6 A full audio transcript of audience responses to this performance may be found on the Radio Works! page of the Montreal Life Stories website: www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca

7 Personal correspondence, 24 July 2011.

WORKS CITED

Bhabha, Homi, ed. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Trans. Charles A. McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979.

Bruner, Jerome. *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2002.

Foa, Edna, Terence Keane, Matthew Friedman, Judith Cohen, eds. *Effective Treatments for PTSD: Practice Guidelines from the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies*. 2nd edition. New York: Guilford, 2009.

Fox, Jonathan. *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre*. New York: Tusitala, 1994.

———. "A Ritual for our Time." *Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre*. Ed. Jonathan Fox and H. Dauber. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala, 1999.

Frisch, Michael *A. Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany: NY, 1990.

Gergen, Ken J. *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1991.

High, Steven. "Blurring Boundaries: Ethical Practice in Collaborative Oral History Projects." *Oral History at the Crossroads: The Montreal Life Stories Project*. New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

High, Steven, and Edward Little. "Introduction." In *Remembering War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations: Oral History, New Media and the Arts*, ed. Steven High, Edward Little, and Ry Duong. Book manuscript under peer review at University of Toronto Press.

Hoesch, Folma. "The Red Thread: Storytelling as a Healing Process." *Gathering Voices: Essays on Playback Theatre*. Ed. Jonathan Fox and H. Dauber. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala, 1999. 46-66

Johnson, David Read. "Developmental Transformations: Towards the Body as Presence." *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy*. Ed. David R. Johnson and Renee Emunah, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2009.

———. "Performing Absence: The Limits of Testimony in the Recovery of the Combat Veteran." *Healing Collective Trauma Using Sociodrama and Drama Therapy*. Ed. Eva Leveton, NY: Springer, 2010. 55-80

Landy, Robert. *Persona and Performance: The Meaning of Role in Drama Therapy, and Everyday Life*. New York: Guilford, 1993.

Leavy, Patricia. *Method Meets Arts: Arts Based Research Practice*. New York: Guilford. 2009.

Little, Edward. "Never Again." *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* 7.2 (2010): 4-9.

Lubin, Hadar, and David Read Johnson. *Trauma-Centered Group Psychotherapy for Women: A Clinician's Manual*. New York: Guilford, 2008.

Montreal Life Stories Project. Concordia University, n.d. Web.

Pollock, Della. *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*. NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Rowe, Nick. *Playing the Other: Dramatizing Personal Narratives in Playback Theatre*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2007.

Sajnani, Nisha, and David Read Johnson. *Opening up Playback Theatre: Perspectives from the Theatre of the Oppressed and Developmental Transformations*. www.creativealternatives.co/publications

Sajnani, Nisha, Warren Linds, Lisa Ndejuru, and Alan Wong. "The Bridge: Toward Relational Aesthetic Inquiry in the Montreal Life Stories Project." *Canadian Theatre Review* (forthcoming).

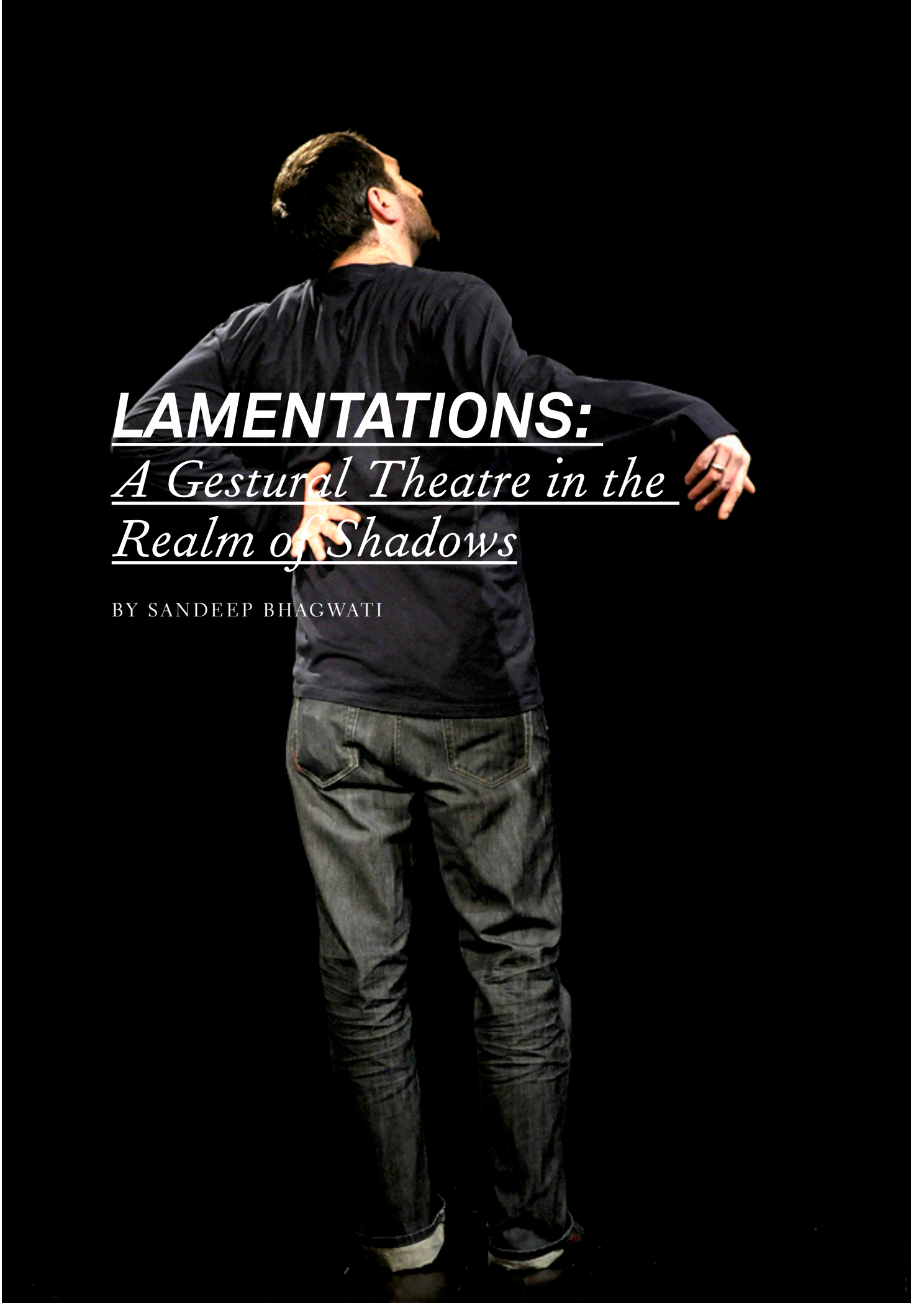
Sajnani, Nisha, Alan Wong, Warren Linds, and Lisa Ndejuru. "Turning Together: Playback Theatre, Oral History, and Arts-Based Research in the Montreal Life Stories Project." In *Remembering War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations: Oral History, New Media and the Arts*, ed. Steven High, Edward Little, and Ry Duong. Book manuscript under peer review at University of Toronto Press.

Salverson, Julie. "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury." *Theater* 31.3 (2001): 119-125.

Scheff, Thomas. *Catharsis in Healing, Ritual, and Drama*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979.

Taylor, M. C. and E. Saarinen. *Imagologies: Media Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Wimberly, Edward. Relational Refugees: *Alienation and Re-Incorporation in African American Churches and Communities*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.



LAMENTATIONS:
A Gestural Theatre in the Realm of Shadows

BY SANDEEP BHAGWATI

The theatre production *Lamentations* has its origin in a simple observation I made about myself when I was very young. I was born in India and come from a large and boisterous Indian family; but my mother is German, and so I was also raised in German ways and customs. I have lived in Europe since I was six, but stayed in India for several months every year—and I could not help noticing that I not only was fluent in several spoken languages, but also had two different sets of body languages.

This, of course, is in no way special—in fact, we know that our body language changes with our social role. And as each of us has many different social roles, we all master different sets of body languages.

Most of the differences are subtle enough, but they serve a main social purpose: to signal the degree of congruity with a given social environment. We would be quite disturbed, for example, by a lover interacting with us with the body language expected at a corporate finance meeting. We tend to homogenize this inner gestural diversity, the essentially chameleonesque nature of our existence, in order to consolidate it into something we then call our "identity." We would so like to forget that identity is one of the most persistent illusions we know.

The discrepancies between my Indian and my German set of body languages, however, were and still are so significant that the very distance between my two "gestural mother tongues" forced me to confront an aspect of my being that others can elegantly gloss over.

Rewind to a few years ago: I was just about to write a research-creation grant around the concept of "ephemeral roots" in today's world when Steven High's offer to join the Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and other Human Rights Abuses project led me to ask the question: How would displaced persons experience the gestural repertoire of a strange country and culture? Would they understand it, adapt to it, learn it?

I was interested in the question of "gestural accent." Does such a thing exist? Do people who were raised into one gestural language learn another gestural language with ease and fluency? Do they develop hybrid gestural repertoires? Again, from my entirely nonscientific everyday observations of people on the street, in cafés, and on public transport, I had a hunch that this was indeed the case.

As an artist, I then asked myself what this could mean for theatre? A recent immigrant to North America myself, I see people in the streets of Montreal use a gestural vocabulary that in my previous habitats—in Berlin, Paris, etc.—I had only encountered in mediocre North American TV series and Hollywood films. To my eyes, this particular way of gesturing was something bad actors did, not real people I knew. Suddenly, displaced to Montreal, I saw people gesturing

and vocalizing in this Hollywood style everywhere. I saw young couples repeating the empty actorly love gestures from mushy TV dramas ("hand on the heart" for "I truly mean it," or "finger pulling eye down" for "I do not believe this," etc.) and I could not shake off the feeling that they were all indeed some kind of ham actor troupe, out to mislead and manipulate me (and perhaps each other) with their gestures. There were moments when I felt I had stumbled onto the set of *The Truman Show*.

One of the first things I did after my arrival here was to sit in on auditions for a new collective creation theatre piece that I had been asked to develop with students at Concordia University. In the course of the audition, I asked each auditioning student to tell and gesture a story about identity from their own lives. I expected a lot of oh, ah, hemming and hawing awkwardness. I still remember my utter confusion when almost all the actors not only pattered along quite happily about the most intimate aspects of their lives, but also without fail used the same Hollywood gestures to convey their stories to me—gestures that to me seemed hackneyed beyond belief.

One of the intriguing surprises that led me to *Lamentations* was my initial encounter with the video interviews made by the Life Stories team. Here, my assistant Florian Götz and I found a rich lore of non-standardized gestural languages, some of them hybrid, some of them tightly and consciously controlled.

I remember one interview with someone who had been implicated in a tyrannical regime as a member of the higher administration: he did not move so much as a finger throughout the entire interview. Only when asked point-blank about his personal judgement on the tyrant did he gesture in a solitary, short movement—he scratched the top of his head before answering in a very controlled way.

At the beginning of the interviews we could clearly, and somewhat unsettlingly, discern in the interviewees their knowledge of how to behave and move when on camera. But the further into the past they delved, the more other kinds of gestures emerged—movements would spill out of the TV screen, become things of their own, fearsome and, in many cases, awkward, as if reined in, or terminated abruptly.

I wondered how I would address all these insights as a theatre director when I met with the actors I had chosen for this piece. I did not have a plan, a script, or a set trajectory for our process. We had no performance in sight, nothing would force us to settle for things we did not want to do.

But what *did* we want to do? We looked at edited footage that Florian and I had prepared—"moments of truth," as we called them, essentially portraits of the gestural language of each particular interviewee. These "moments of truth" contained truth also in something I had surmised but had not been sure I would see: superpositions of familiar gestures with unfamiliar gestures, sometimes one breaking out of the other, or taking over the other. This, to me, became the essence of displacement: a body, displaced into a new social and cultural environment, does not remain the same body. Its very gestures, its most embodied language, is commandeered by the will to survive, remodelled to conform, fit in, even basically communicate in this strange new social environment.

As a first step we had each of the actors mimic exactly what was happening on the screen. Sometimes, we would make them turn away from the screen and compare their body memory of the gestures with the actual interview, cueing them if they lost the thread—until they were perfectly in sync. At this point it was not yet clear to me whether I would reconstitute a fictitious and hybrid gestural language from all the interviews or do something else. Suddenly, my work as a composer became relevant to this theatrical project.

As a composer of chamber and orchestral music, I have developed a compositional strategy I call "comprovisation"—where composer and performers share authority in creating a performed instance of a new work. This approach to creation rests heavily on something I call "encapsulated traditions." Most musical improvisation is far from being as spontaneous as the word suggests. Indeed, all musical improvisers rely heavily on sets of stylistic criteria, structural rules, and support—and on their embodied memory of musical phrases, inscribed into their body through continuous practice and enriched by repeated performance. Each music improviser relies on a specific tradition of improvisation, often so heavily that musicians from different improvising traditions have the same problem of communication that speakers of different languages have.

In my comprovisations, I invent (compose) the stylistic criteria that make up such traditions. Each piece comprises several of these different encapsulations, for my intent is not to invent yet another tradition of improvisation, but to create a polyphony of improv approaches within the architecture of a larger work. Only when each musician has embodied all the encapsulated traditions of the work do we come together and create the superstructure, the communications between them that allow a orchestral composition to grow out of intertwined individual improvisations.

I am sure you will have made the connection by now: each interviewee could be seen as one encapsulated tradition, one consistent body language that the actors could learn and then improvise upon. I asked each actor to choose one interviewee they felt close to, or comfortable with, or intrigued by. Interestingly, there was no fight—everyone chose a different person. In this process, we obviously had to let go of all the "wonderful material" present in all the other interviews. But art is an exercise in focus, not in comprehensiveness.

Once we had made our decision, the next step for the actors was to go from imitation to analysis and then to synthesis. The fragments we could see onscreen were extremely isolated moments of a person's life, and even of the interview. In some cases there were too few gestures for a gestural repertoire to be fully established. The actors had to use physical extrapolation, observing themselves while imitating the gestures: what kind of muscle sets were being activated, where did the gestures go, what was common between them.

This process is akin to martial arts practice or to Asian forms of theatre, where the student learns to copy the exact movement from the master before studying the inherent emotionality. Yet there is a subtle but important difference. In the Asian

This, to me, became the essence of displacement: a body, displaced into a new social and cultural environment, does not remain the same body.

© matralab / Upper: Leila Thibeault-Louchem, Lower: Stephanie Merulla in *Lamentations*

forms, the movements are whole body movements that are already composed and optimized. In our process, as it developed, we had to find optimal recombinations of the disjointed gestures of sitting people. We never saw their legs. I remember a long rehearsal in which everyone tried to make an educated guess about how each of the interviewees were actually sitting, and then tried to imagine how they would walk.

But limitation always also affords a strength: it forced the actors to empathize and embody the other even more.

The first test for our work was a performance on June 13, 2009, at a study day of the Life Stories project. In a normal conference room, all four actors sat at and around a table and gestured, largely independently. We had agreed, in the manner of a jazz band, on an intro, four solos, and an outro, but otherwise the actors could do whatever they wanted, provided they faithfully reproduced "their" interviewee.

Two interesting insights emerged from this very sketchy and rough presentation. First, the gestures "worked." The audience, composed mainly of university and community participants in a Life Stories project working session, reacted very strongly to the emotionality and the transparency of the mute gesture. One response likened the performance to the muteness that for many survivors and onlookers is the only possible reaction to unspeakable horror: Where words fail gestures still will speak. Second, I started to notice unexpected connections and an emerging dialogue between these seemingly unrelated gestural languages. I should have been prepared for this to happen—musical composers since John Cage have vividly and in great variety explored our minds' ability to reconstruct meaning and dialogue, cohesiveness, and intention out of structurally and contextually disparate material. What I began to see was the possibility of a true polyphony of gestural streams, a mutually reinforcing interplay of diverse gestural languages.

At this point, the question of text began to re-enter the stage. After all, the interviewees had been talking about something important to them while they were gesturing. What should we do with these often very emotional statements? Up to now I had decidedly disregarded them: We had edited the "gestural moments of truth" from the interview videos without any regard to content, sometimes even cutting in midword. I then had asked the actors, while imitating the video clips, to turn off the sound so as to better concentrate on the movement. I thus clearly did not want to make any artistic use of the very testimonies that had been the raison d'etre for the interviews in the first place. But why?

My palpable aversion to testimonials again stems from my experience of displacement in North America—and the audition experience with students I mentioned previously. The fact that young people can prattle on easily about matters of personal intimacy while being prudish with their bodies is strange for a European. There, bodies can be bared in public without any problem, but people do not easily bare their souls to strangers. In North America, however, I encountered what I privately label "Oprah porn": a pervasive and obligatory promiscuousness about the most intimate of emotional experiences that to me seems as unhealthy as the excessive bodily prudishness exemplified by the hullabaloo around Janet Jackson's "nipple-gate."

The political theatre I am interested in makes a social quagmire emotionally and intellectually tractable—by fictionalizing it, by making it in-authentic, if you will.

In his book *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), Richard Sennett writes, "The term 'gemeinschaft' means, originally, the full disclosure of feeling to others … a special social group in which open emotional relations are possible … converting the immediate experience of sharing with others into a social principle"(310-11). As anyone who looks at texts critically will know, testimonials made under such social duress to confess are most likely fabrications or "snow jobs," intended to mislead the probing questioner and protect the speaker. They need not be consciously fabricated; indeed, they are most convincing if the speaker is convinced of their truth. They subvert the desire to be known into the desire to be acceptable.

As a theatre artist, my squabble with most of the "confessional" theatre striving to faithfully do justice to the real experience of victims of political and social breakdowns or oppression is that such an approach irresponsibly panders to a widespread fallacy: namely, that somehow an "emotional truth" makes a social and political point more valid and pertinent. When we believe in the superior social veracity of "authentic" feelings of "real" people (because we want to "engage the audience"), we all too often disenfranchise intellectual analysis, political awareness.

Especially in North American media, the private has become political to the point of distraction. On the CBC *National*, supposedly an independent and fair public news broadcast, incidental homicides routinely receive more coverage than wide-sweeping changes in any area of government policy. It seems easier to talk about politicians' love lives than about their economic acumen, easier to worry about whether a penis entered a forbidden vagina than worry about the war in Afghanistan. Such a strong media bias reinforces political ignorance and thus creates an antidemocratic smokescreen for political machinations. Sadly, the aesthetic obsession with "human interest stories" thus becomes an accomplice in this ongoing effort to eclipse both the faceless agendas and vested interests and the cultural and sociological contexts that fundamentally fashion and sway our lives. Sennett writes,

> The refusal to deal with, absorb and exploit reality outside the parochial scale is … a universal human desire … Community feeling formed by the sharing of impulses [reinforces] the fear of the unknown, converting claustrophobia into an ethical principle … Unfortunately, large scale forces in society may psychologically be kept at a distance, but do not therefore go away. (310-11)

Scientists make simplified models to understand complex issues; artists use fictions for the same purpose—to make a complicated situation as clear as possible by eliminating the noise around it. The political theatre I am interested in makes a social quagmire emotionally and intellectually tractable—by fictionalizing it, by making it in-authentic, if you will. Adorno's phrase for this is "*zur Kenntlichkeit entstellen*": that is, to distort something until its hidden nature is revealed. In other words, my discomfort with using the interview texts in this artistic production was that this would be an obscurantist approach to their reality—a cuddly and over-emotional de-emphasizing of the brute realities they had lived through.

But if not these texts, then which? None—and let the gestures speak for themselves? We discussed this option in the team, but felt that this much reticence would cloud the issues that interested us as much as too much extrovert "authenticity" would. The ultimate solution for this dilemma were two classical texts of Western civilization: *Flow my tears*, a song by Elizabethan composer John Dowland, and the biblical "Lamentations of Jeremiah."[1] Both texts transform personal woes into stark and intransigent laments. And their classical nature would counter the "bias towards the living" inherent in working on interview testimonials. For listening to a collection of raw oral reports can easily evoke empathy, but it can also blind us to the fact that what has happened so recently is neither new nor unexpected. The Babylonian displacement of the Jewish nation portrayed in the "Lamentations of Jeremiah," the repeated forced resettlements of millions throughout Chinese history, the ignominious displacement of Aboriginal North American populations, the displacement of the Acadians, the Black Atlantic slave trade etc.—in each of these, and in countless other maelstroms, human rights were crushed in the most abject manner. No people is immune to this seemingly inevitable and sinister shadow of civilization, as either victim or perpetrator. It is what humans do—because they are social animals. Any work of art about displacement and its horrors must thus make us aware of this realm of shadows that governs our world.

This last thought underlines a final concern that surfaced in the course of the theatrical implementation of our gestural research. Again it was a problem with testimonies. People who go to see critical plays about sensitive issues tend to be empathic listeners. And people who tell their story of suffering tend to portray themselves as victims. I will never forget attending a concert in Salzburg in 1985, at which I inadvertently eavesdropped on a conversation in the aisle behind me. Two people who evidently had not met since World War II were telling each other their stories of escape and exile, how they had barely evaded their captors by crossing ice-cold rivers barefoot and hiding in the mountains. With shaky old voices they lamented their sorry fate, and how their suffering had so long been ignored by the world at large. Only after some time had passed did a revealing exchange between them make me realize that they must have been officers in the Nazi SS. And by not speaking up after this realization, I became a condoning bystander to their crimes.

Raul Hilberg's analysis of the perpetrator-victim-bystander triangle in his eponymous book clearly shows that these three roles are far from being unequivocal, especially if a conflict drags on. It would be wrong to indicate which actor represented a legitimate victim and which actor could be cast as a perpetrator throughout. In *Lamentations*, identification with the actors is always a risky thing, because the persona who has just suffered so intensely may well perpetrate quite horrible things in the next second. Also, in our full staging of this work, the spectators, usually comfortably ensconced in an observer's position, must stand in the same space used by the actors. Only centimetres separate them from the cruelty; they could stop it—and, of course, do not. And throughout the play, spectators are displaced and can never be sure whether or not the floor they stand on will suddenly become the stage of conflict. One spectator described his emotions to me after the first full theatrical performance of *Lamentations* on November 8, 2010,[2] in the Hexagram Black Box at Concordia University:

> I felt lost and disoriented, forced to take in the collective state of the audience as a whole. I observed the different tactics people administered when unsure as to how to navigate or conduct themselves. Some chose to move to the perimeter of the room, hiding against the walls, or in shadows. Others chose to unify with other audience members, joining in more collective participatory positioning, where awareness was heightened and safety in numbers could be embraced. With this said, the way the piece was staged was staggering and ominous. I felt very vulnerable. (Hurl)

Welcome to the realm of shadows, where an actor's mute gestures invoke the suffering of absent people, where the audience wants to avoid looking too closely for fear of becoming implicated, where all the words we hear are those of the dead, spoken by the living. And where the close observation of one person's gestures reveals how complex the inner oscillation must be between the strong desire to embrace the bland but safe banality of life in the aftermath and acknowledge the very real presence of the horrors we have all perpetrated, and seen, and survived.

NOTES

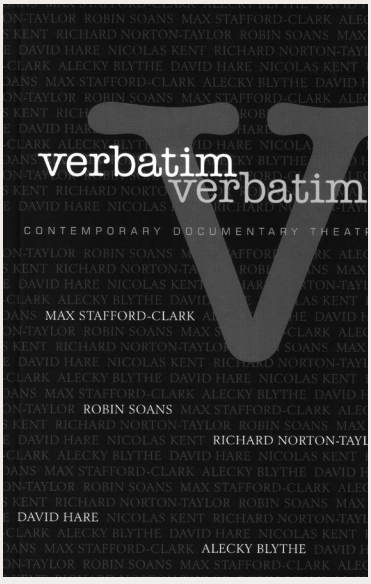
1 These were used in a slightly modified form: I extracted key sentences from the "Lamentations of Jeremiah" and translated them anew from Latin into colloquial contemporary North American English. The texts were used very sparsely, and often incongruously—spoken in the stage action often without any dramatic referent, as a further layer of meaning, as a semantic prop. The Dowland song was sung by the actors using the original text.

2 A DVD of this performance can be obtained from matralab@gmail.com

WORKS CITED

Hurl, Ryan. Email to the author. 9 November 2010.

Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man*. New York: Knopff, 1977.



Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre

EDITED BY WILL HAMMOND AND DAN STEWARD. LONDON: OBERON BOOKS, 2008. PP. 174.

Book review

BY ALEJANDRO YOSHIZAWA

THE VARYING OPINIONS AND METHODS ADDRESSED IN VERBATIM VERBATIM ARE VERY REFRESHING, AND CONTRIBUTE TO THE BOOK'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING ASPIRATION.

Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre is a collection of essays and interviews about verbatim theatre. The six contributing dramatists, all who incorporate verbatim techniques (the word-for-word use of a transcript, typically produced from an interview) in their work, reflect on a wide range of issues related to verbatim theatre, resulting in varying and sometimes conflicting views. The editors immediately acknowledge this in the introduction, noting that the book "explore[s] the ways in which verbatim defies any straightforward categorization." They continue, "[The book] also provides the contributors with an opportunity to address […] questions that [verbatim theatre] continues to provoke—questions of truth and integrity, reality and fiction—as well as questions about rehearsal, research, editing, stagecraft, and performance techniques." The book is meant to be a snapshot of how verbatim techniques are currently being utilized, as well as to incite further debate.

The book opens with an essay by writer/actor Robin Soans, whose writing credits include *Life After Scandal*, *Talking to Terrorists*, and *A State Affair*, all of which used verbatim methods. For Soans, verbatim theatre is very much a creative endeavor, despite the "real world" origin of the material that is "weaved" into scenes. According to Soans, the audience plays an important role in verbatim theatre, assuming an active rather than passive role. This can be seen in the relationship between the audience and the actors: the actors "confide" in the audience, as they recall deeply personal, "real," stories. The realness of these conversations demands the audience has a responsibility to listen, a responsibility Soans thinks the audience enjoys. Ultimately, Soans believes that the difference between conventional and verbatim plays is not that great; for him, verbatim plays must still be built around a narrative and set up dramatic conflict with characters that go on journeys. Much of the creativity in verbatim plays comes from the editing process.

However, Soans also evokes sentiments familiar to other interview-based fields, such as oral history. Soans notes that verbatim theatre provides "listening ears" for voices not usually heard, but at the same time he acknowledges the chances for and repercussions of misrepresentation. Soans recalls a warning given to him once: "*Never forget it's someone's life*." The spectre of profiting or benefiting from someone else's troubles remains an issue not easily negotiated.

Following Soans' essay is an interview with writer David Hare and director Max Stafford-Clark, which provides a useful discussion of the interpersonal dynamics and unique methods that go into making a verbatim play. Hare and Stafford-Clark spend a lot of time reminiscing about verbatim plays they worked on, specific issues faced by the writers, directors, and actors, and the unique relationships formed between these groups when preparing the play. For instance, Stafford-Clark claims that in verbatim theatre the actors "take possession of their characters" and as such become more "protective" of them; this produces a more democratic play insofar as the directors cede some say into how the material is to be delivered. In Stafford-Clark's view, the actors "know" their interviewee best.

Among the many other topics Hare and Stafford-Clark touch upon, the most compelling is the comparison between verbatim theatre and journalism; first introduced in the interview, this becomes a major theme of many of the dramatists in *Verbatim Verbatim*. Hare argues that verbatim theatre does what journalism fails to do, noting that "[verbatim plays] don't have the bad record journalism has for misrepresenting people." Stafford-Clark adds that all verbatim plays are a combination of journalism and autobiography. Such comparisons appear throughout the book.

Writer/director Alecky Blythe provides the most intriguing essay, dealing mainly with issues pertaining to gathering interviews and then performing them. With regard to the latter, Blythe outlines a method she calls *recorded delivery*, where the actors perform with audio headphones through which the actual interview(s) play. According to Blythe, there is "something magical about the unique level of spontaneity that unlearnt delivery demands." Blythe also claims this method prevents the actors from "embellishing." Blythe also discusses her decision to include herself as a character in some of her plays. To Blythe, her very prescience, even simply for observation, affects how people interact.

Like many others in *Verbatim Verbatim*, Blythe struggles with the potential conflict between representation and entertainment:

> People who agree to be recorded for my shows are entrusting me with their stories, which are often very personal, so I do feel a great responsibility to present them in a way that they are happy with. At the same time I have a responsibility to the audience to present them with a good evening's theatre. A successful play will strike a balance between the two. (94)

However, unlike others, Blythe does not shy away from mixing verbatim texts with fiction. In the end, the need to be entertaining trumps the need to be "factual," a method Blythe justifies as an evolution of verbatim theatre: "like any form of theatre, verbatim needs to keep reinventing itself in order to keep thriving […] An audience wants to be entertained, and this means being gripped by a story which facts and journalism—and 'pure' verbatim—may not be able to provide."

The final portion of the book contains an essay by writer/journalist Richard Norton-Taylor and an interview with director Nicolas Kent. Both present approaches to verbatim theatre that contrast with Blythe. Norton-Taylor focuses on what he calls "tribunal plays," which transpose public inquiries into performances. In tribunal plays, "truth" is a constant theme, and Norton-Taylor openly questions whether or not verbatim theatre is a creative act at all: "But is making a tribunal play a creative act? True, I do not think up a story, nor do I write dialogue. The choices I must make are different from those of a writer who begins with a blank sheet of paper. Editing […] seem[s] more of a craft than an art."

Norton-Taylor compares verbatim theatre to journalism, claiming it to be an advantageous method since the "entire story" can be put on display, as opposed to a scattering of articles and news stories over a long period of time. Hence, the audience is able to comprehend the story as a whole more easily. Moreover, according to Norton-Taylor, theatre does not suffer from the woeful reputation journalism does.

Nicolas Kent takes a similar stance to Norton-Taylor on verbatim theatre, calling it a "living newspaper" that can tackle big issues. Of all the contributors to *Verbatim Verbatim*, Kent comes across as the most vehemently opposed to the mixing of verbatim and fictional texts, writing, "I absolutely do not like that form at all. I find that form slightly dishonest." Kent goes on, "The strength of verbatim theatre is that it's absolutely truthful, it's exactly what someone said." The equating of *truth* to verbatim is somewhat unsettling; *accuracy*, in my view, would have been a more comfortable association. Nevertheless, Kent's point is clear: "[My] plays are a response to a moment. I'm not looking at them as art, I'm looking at them as a journalistic response to what is happening."

The varying opinions and methods addressed in *Verbatim Verbatim* are very refreshing, and contribute to the book's thought-provoking aspiration. Despite the book's lean 174 pages, some of the writers do go into exhaustive detail about the genesis of their plays, how they were received, and the various interpersonal or logistical problems they may have faced. While this may be of interest to some, it is here where *Verbatim Verbatim* sometimes strays from its focus. Nevertheless, the level of detail afforded also contributes many insights to the creation of a verbatim performance. In addition to philosophical musings on verbatim theatre, the unique nuances of performing/acting "someone else's story" and the role and reaction of the audience/critics provide interesting reading material.

The most intriguing theme in *Verbatim Verbatim* is the comparison between verbatim theatre and journalism. This is not surprising, given that verbatim theatre utilizes many of the same techniques as journalism, and in most cases both purport to some degree of *truthfulness*—or, my preferred word, *accuracy*. Much in the same way as some journalists, verbatim writers/directors seem to relish the opportunity to "tell an untold story" or "give the big picture." Ultimately, regardless of the writers' differing approaches, a cohesive belief can be gleaned from *Verbatim Verbatim*: that verbatim theatre's current potency and future potential are undeniable.

30

Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

Celebrates 30 years of powerful, provocative, original theatre

People Power
Almighty Voice and His Wife
The Great Celestial Cow
Divided We Stand
entures of Ali & Ali
and the Axes of Evi
On the Double
Nazm-e-Faiz
Noah s Ark 747
The Last 15 Seconds
Reading Hebron
Ghar Ghar ki Kahani and gaddh
For you Jafroon
Bhanumati ka Pitara
Thank you Mr. Glad
My Name is Rachel Corrie
Truth and Treason
L'Affaire Farhadi
Bhopal
Equal Wages
Job Stealer
A Leaf in the Whirlwind
No Man s Land
Julius
Seven Jewish Children
Miss Orient(ed)
Scarf
Counter Offence
Zahreeli Hawa
Isolated Incident
Land Where Trees Talk

Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

1006 Rue de la Montagne, Suite 111
Montréal, QC H3G 1Y7
T:514.848.0238 email: info@teesriduniya.com

Stay current on what's going on at Teesri Duniya by visiting us at
www.teesriduniya.com

and join us on to get instant updates.

Change the World, One play at a time

NORKO
Voyages Travel

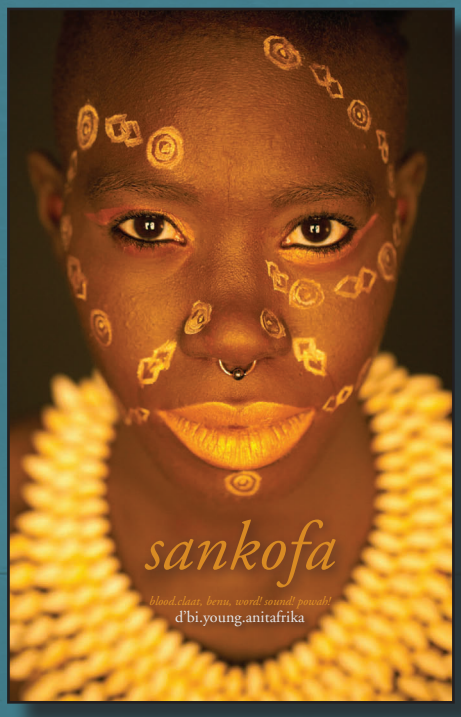
VOYAGES NORKO TRAVEL

Serving Travelers since 1970

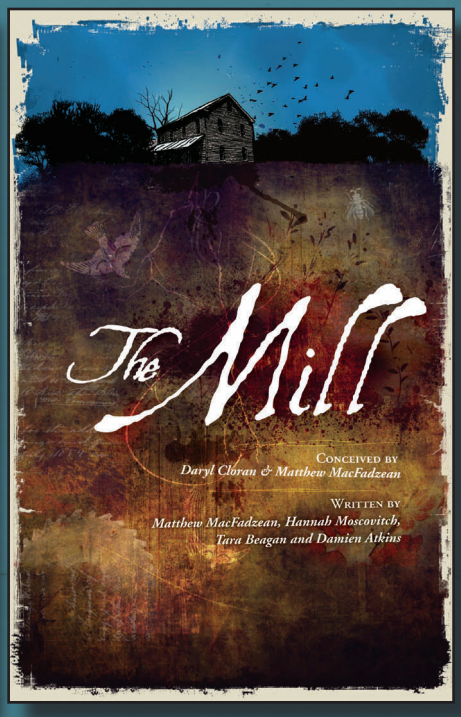
- *Air Tickets at Discounted Prices*
- *Holiday Packages*
- *Tours to India and Pakistan*
- *Hotel Reservations, Car Hire*
- *Travel Insurance*

AIR CANADA
طيران الخليج GULF AIR
PIA
الخطوط الجوية العربية السعودية SAUDI ARABIAN AIRLINES
TURKISH AIRLINES
Emirates
SINGAPORE AIRLINES
Austrian
BRITISH AIRWAYS

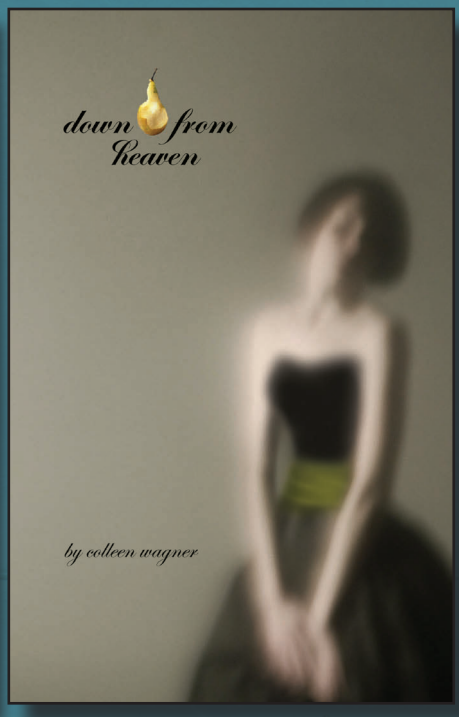
www.norkotravel.com
manager@norkotravel.com
1234 Stanley Street,
Montreal, Quebec, H3B 2S7
514-871-8888 1-888-871-8888



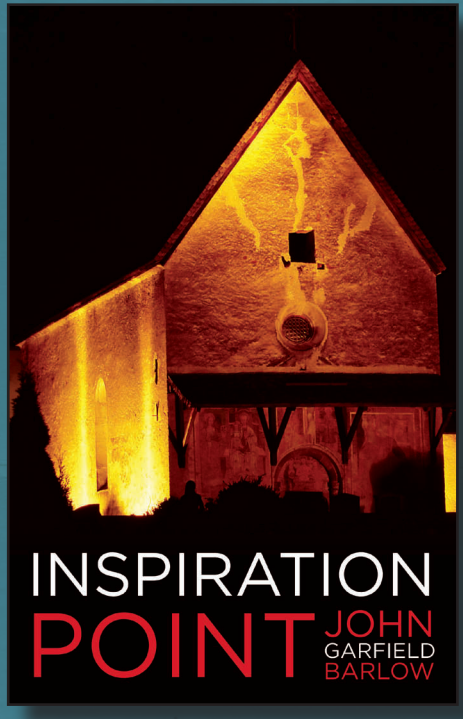
the sankofa trilogy: blood.claat, benu, word! sound! powah! by d'bi.young.anitafrika **November**



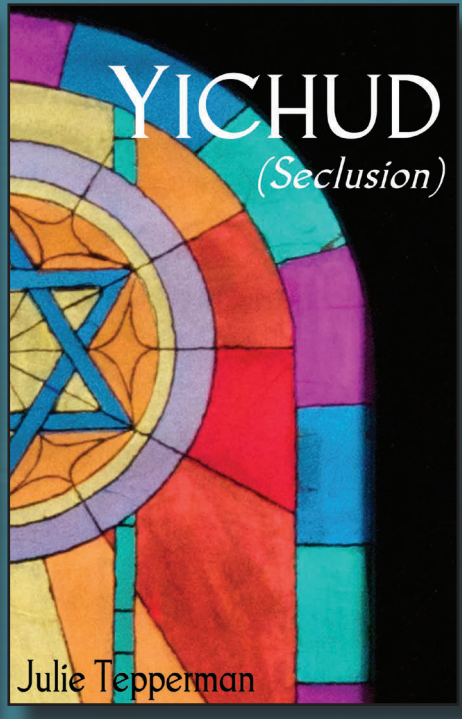
The Mill by Matthew MacFadzean, Hannah Moscovitch, Tara Beagan, and Damien Atkins **October**



down from heaven by Colleen Wagner **Available now**



Inspiration Point by John Garfield Barlow **Available now**



YICHUD (Seclusion) by Julie Tepperman **Available now**

NEW THIS FALL FROM

PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS

WWW.PLAYWRIGHTSCANADA.COM