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Aida Jordão
Stephanie Lambert
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BOOK REVIEW
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reviewing *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* and *Community Engaged Theatre and Performance* (ed. Julie Salverson): volumes 17 & 19 of the *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* series.

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Image from Vancouver Moving Theatre's production of *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet*

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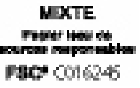

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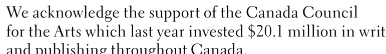

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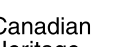

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Editorial

Chop Chop

BY EDWARD LITTLE

Chop Chop go the blades of the police helicopters slicing the air over the heads of our children for weeks on end during this spring's tuition protests in Montreal. Chop chop chant the feds as they call for ongoing corporate tax cuts, reductions in the public service, and the evisceration of the CBC. Chop Chop was the approach of Enbridge Inc. when their contractors cut down fourteen sacred trees on traditional Haisla territory while surveying routes for the Northern Gateway pipeline—ancient, culturally modified trees that, according to Haisla leaders, establish land claims dating back hundreds of years (Dembicki). Chop Chop says a government bent on imposing austerity—in spite of warnings that its actions will prolong the recession and further accelerate growing social and economic inequity (Himelfarb).

Ka-ching Ka-ching go the cash registers of bankers, CEOs, and the most wealthy 1% of Canadians as they ring up pay hikes, bonuses, stock options, and profits at speeds unprecedented since the roaring twenties and the heyday of the Robber Barons (Yalnizyan). Squeeeeze go the wallets of average Canadians as they dig deeper and deeper to pay for a "debt crisis" that Kahnert and Gindin argue is in reality "a distribution of wealth crisis."

Amidst an incessant barrage of marketing, spin, manipulation, diversion, obfuscation, and ideological rhetoric, everybody—to evoke the ING and Capital One ads—wants to get their "hands in your pockets." The food industry, deeply implicated in an epidemic of obesity, targets the adolescent market with "healthy option" fast foods that contain more grams of fat than a Boston Cream doughnut (CBC Marketplace). A federal government blindly committed to the Free Market doctrine of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics attempts to shut down debate on economic alternatives with attack ads that characterize the policies of Thomas Mulcair and the NDP as "dangerous economic experiments." Yet the economic blood-letting since 2008 appears to be largely at the hands of the newer kid on the block—the Chicago School—considered by many economists to be morally bankrupt in its complicity in the economics of greed, and economically impotent in its failure to dig us out of the current economic malaise (Campbell; Fraenkel and Etinson; Greenberg; Himelfarb). For the conservatives, it's an "inconvenient truth" that Mulcair's economics tend towards the Keynesian model that brought us decades of wealth, job creation, socio-economic equality, and public infrastructure development prior to the neoliberal assault on the "Welfare State."

Meanwhile, the Conservative government is spending $28 million to convince us that the War of 1812 was an event of "great national significance" (Gutstein; Fitzpatrick), and corporate media distracts us with a flood of what Linda McQuaig characterizes as "celebrity worship and corporate fawning" (CCPA). For insight into the political endgame of this anti-intellectual mindlessness, we need only look south of the border, where the Republican Party of Texas has now declared that it opposes the teaching of critical thinking in public schools (Weil). It's the "lie back and think of England" approach to getting screwed by the 1%.

And if any of the Free Market fundamentalists who oppose government and taxation remain concerned that Harper's militaristic, anti-Kyoto, let-them-eat-tar sands Conservatives are not doing enough to discredit Canada's reputation on the world stage or diminish public trust in government here at home, they can always count on the likes of the Fraser Institute to take a poke at the ideology of the Common Good. Self-proclaimed as "Canada's leading public policy think-tank," the institute claims "independence" based on their policy to "not accept grants from governments or contracts for research." If the institute's puffery doesn't raise critical eyebrows, then their donor's list should. *The Huffington Post* recently reported that the Tea-Party-throwing Koch Brothers (a.k.a. the "Kochtopus") have given over half a million dollars to the think tank in recent years (Tencer). As Joyce Nelson points out, "The Fraser Institute has come out strongly in favour of rapid tar sands development and new export pipelines which would benefit Koch Industries' U.S. Refineries." While the credibility of corporate giants like Enbridge continue to spring leaks faster than their pipeline at the Kalamazoo River, the Fraser Institute persists in promoting privatization and disparaging government with rhetorical strategies such as their Tax Freedom Day, which reduces discussion of taxation to "days worked for the Government" versus "days worked for yourself." The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), on the other hand, calculates that middle income Canadians currently receive the equivalent of about $41,000 per year in public service funded by their taxes. Stats Can (chop chop) lists the average single working Canadian's net income at $36,800.

And so back to our students. In the words of the immortal Janis Joplin, "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose." In the absence of informed and honest debate, transparency in government, and democratic leadership, who and what should students believe? Official stats put youth unemployment at close to 15% with actual numbers likely to be considerably higher as many young people enroll in higher education in times of scarce employment. *Globe and Mail* personal finance columnist Rob Carrick advises that budgeting $18-20K per year for a four-year degree is "prudent," and no-one seems to want to mention the cost of a graduate degree. Student debt in Canada is averaging between $20 to $27K, while tuition fee increases across Canada over the past twenty-eight years have outstripped the average rate of inflation by more than double, and show no signs of abating. If your family qualifies for student loan assistance from a private bank, you can get a loan or line-of-credit for as low as 4%. If your family doesn't qualify, you can still apply for a Canada Student Loan at 8%. The Government Student Loan online calculator automatically sets the term at 10 years; however, on average students take 9.5 years to pay off their loans (Sylvestre-Williams). Going it alone? The gross annual income for a person working fifty weeks a year at minimum wage in Canada comes in at under $20K. Thinking of a career in the arts? Artists average considerably less.

Perhaps you are thinking of buying a home or starting a family sometime after you've retired your student loan debt. According to Carrick, "The cost of purchasing a home in Canada has risen on average 5.8% a year since the mid-1980s" when "a house might have cost a family 1.6 times its annual income." Today that home costs 6 times an annual income.

"Students must pay their fair share" say those advocating tuition hikes—"increases in tuition will not be a barrier for low income families." Yet for individuals and families struggling to get by with stagnant wages, unemployment, or chronic underemployment—people to whom the culture of grants and bursaries is as foreign as the controls of a Lexus, such as the one leased by a Concordia vice-president at the university's expense—spending $72-80K on a bachelor's degree (with student loan interest bringing the total up to somewhere between $81-92K) must seem about as smart as playing hacky sack with the family jewels, or sticking your tits in a blender. Meanwhile, the CCPA calculates that recent corporate tax cuts have reduced government revenue by over $200 billion, while cuts to the GST are costing an additional $13 billion a year in lost revenue ("Index"; Campbell, "What kind"). And while we consider it morally justifiable to tax citizens for the goods and services related to buying essentials such as a pair of winter boots, it's somehow

dangerous economics to even consider taxing financial instruments and transactions—a tax that even at .05 percent, would generate billions of dollars a year in revenues (Babones; "Canadian"; Wrobel).

Are we so impoverished that we cannot afford to have a serious conversation about education and taxes? Do we no longer believe that that education is a public good? What of the claim by the Canadian Association of University Teachers that "university education is one of the best investments a government can make to promote economic growth" ("Funding")? Can we not do the math to prove or disprove the assertion that graduates who secure higher paid employment more than pay for their education through a progressive graduated tax system—or is this idea total anathema to those who are anti-tax? Can we not see that "students who take out loans end up paying considerably more for the same education (through interest on their debt) than their peers whose parents can afford the tuition fees up front" (Ivanov)? We appear to be caught in what Game Theorists call "a social trap—even when we know that cooperation with others would serve our collective interests, we go off on our own" (Himelfarb, "Cutting" 6).

Little wonder that Linda McQuaig accuses us of "throwing our own young under the bus." The Canada Student Loan debt, which "falls disproportionately on low-income households," has now reached $14.4 billion and is growing by the second (Quebec). The Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) calculates that with provincial and private bank loans added the total is nearer $22 billion. For lenders, even at 4% interest, that's a market rapidly approaching $1 billion a year—quite a few tidy pounds of flesh from our children.

Yet when our young join the Occupy movement, or take to the streets to protest inequality, corporate abuses, tuition hikes, or the trampling of human rights through anti-protest legislation such as Quebec's "Bill Seventy-Hate" (a pun on the francophone pronunciation of eight that suggests that Bill 78 may at least be making a significant contribution to French/English bonhomie), we hear grumbling that the protestors are spoiled brats with an inflated sense of entitlement. The real story, as many are pointing out, lies in the intransigence and increasing violent response of the powers that be—a reaction that Chris Hedges characterizes as the death throes of our corporate regime:

> The response of a dying regime—and our corporate regime is dying—is to employ increasing levels of force, and to foolishly refuse to ameliorate the chronic joblessness, foreclosures, mounting student debt, lack of medical insurance and exclusion from the centers of power. Revolutions are fueled by an inept and distant ruling class that perpetuates political paralysis. This ensures its eventual death. ("Why")

We need, as Hedges points out, to "carve out a protected space for those who question and challenge national myths. Artists, writers, poets, activists, journalists, philosophers, dancers, musicians, actors, directors and renegades must be tolerated if a culture is to be pulled back from disaster" ("Turning"). Clearly we need to talk about socioeconomic inequity, government and corporate transparency and accountability, social mobility, education, and the future of our children. And clearly young people must be part of the conversation.

And speaking of "the conversation"—also the title of Nikki Shaffeeullah's article in this issue—this would seem to be an opportune moment to introduce Nikki as the incoming editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre*. Nikki is a theatre artist and community/international development professional. Her areas of specialty include public and youth engagement, non-profit administration, arts-based research, design and publishing. Nikki has studied with Makhampom Theatre Group in Thailand and Teatro Yuyachkani in Peru, holds a BA from McGill University, and is completing her MFA in Community-Based Theatre at the University of Alberta. Nikki assumes her role as editor-in-chief with our September issue. Denis Salter remains as associate editor, and I am looking forward to keeping my oar in the water as an active member of the editorial board.

On behalf of myself and everyone at Teesri Duniya and *alt.theatre*, Welcome Nikki! We are all very much looking forward to working with you.

Ted.

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THE CONVERSATION: *HOW WE TALK ABOUT CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THEATRE*

BY NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

Last November, a body of artists, arts workers, academics, and affiliates gathered in Victoria for Puente Theatre's symposium, Sharing the Legacy: Embracing Diversity and the Practice of Inclusive Theatre in a Changing Society, comprising a series of panel discussions, workshops, and performances. The participants reflected a range of experiences, artistic involvement, and cultural diversity, and the symposium's programming laid the foundation for three days of conversation about diversity and the arts. In many ways, the conference promised to share the legacy of Lina de Guevara, Puente's recently retired founder, whose decades of artistic work and social activism have been two sides of the same coin. Lina and many like her paved the way for new generations of community-engaged, culturally diverse, and immigrant theatre artists in Canada.

© Pamela Bethel Photography / Matthew Payne in Cariboo Buckaroo

THE CONVERSATION | by Nikki Shaffeeullah

> ***"THE CONVERSATION IS HAPPENING EVERYWHERE FROM BOARD ROOMS TO BLOGS TO BARS, AND IT EXISTS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF A GREATER STRUGGLE FOR MULTICULTURAL RECOGNITION IN A COLONIZED COUNTRY AND SETTLER SOCIETY."***

However, beyond the legacy itself, I left the symposium thinking about *how* we talk about these themes. For although the conversation about diversity and the performing arts—or rather, "The Conversation"—is crucial, it is certainly not new.

The Conversation is happening everywhere from board rooms to blogs to bars, and it exists within the context of a greater struggle for multicultural recognition in a colonized country and settler society. The Conversation has been going on for decades, as artists working from the margins fought for equal access to the material resources necessary for successful professional artistic engagement. In the 1980s, culturally diverse theatre artists seeking funding could look to either the Multiculturalism Directive in the Secretary of State or the Canada Council for the Arts. Although the former body could encompass arts funding, it did not have a mandate to fund the arts per se. This was "not an arm's-length agency," as applications were assessed by a field officer, not juries, and funding was ultimately awarded at the minister's discretion (Off 11). The Canada Council, on the other hand, had no mechanism for funding "ethnic" theatre. Such applications seemed folksy and below the standards of "professional" theatre practice when compared to projects of mainstream (Eurocentric) sensibilities. Thus, culturally diverse theatre makers often fell "between the cracks of government agencies," unable to fund their projects or be recognized as professionals. As Don Blair, former executive director of the Folk Arts Council of Winnipeg put it, "The arts councils have a finite pie to divide up. And they don't want to open the door to let in any more takers" (Off 13).

Nevertheless, thanks to the mobilization of Aboriginal and culturally diverse artists within a Canada sanctioned as "Multicultural," a discourse around equity funding began to emerge. The Canada Council officially created their Equity Office in 1991, and other bodies developed advisory groups or hired cross-cultural coordinators to focus on issues of diversity and parity. These gains were tremendous, but the Canadian theatre has not yet fully levelled its playing field. The Ad Hoc Assembly, a "loose coalition of Aboriginal and culturally diverse arts organizations that have come together to re-define the working arts landscape," identifies that even today, the imbalance of power "is embodied in the fact that there is currently no accessible professional performance venue in Canada owned and operated by a diverse organization." The Canadian arts industry has had progress to celebrate—and has further justice to work toward.

Earlier waves of culturally diverse artists have been joined by new generations, and the face of Canada is more diverse than ever. Statistics Canada projects that in five years, one in five Canadians will be a visible minority. It seems natural that in this pluralistic context and after decades of slow but steady progress, arts workers of all cultures and social positions would be able to get together for a forward-moving Conversation propelled by the legacy of previous Conversations. So why does it so often feel like every Conversation about theatre and diversity is the first?

This feeling crept over me as I read over the description for the first panel discussion at Puente's symposium, promisingly entitled "The Value of Cultural Representation on Canadian Stages and in the Performing Arts":

> [...] if we don't work towards a theatre that responds to the interests and expectations of our increasingly diverse population, theatre will become elitist, irrelevant, and devitalized. How can we open up to these influences without losing our identity and histories? What does it mean to work with underprivileged & underserved communities? What is the correlation between different target audiences? Do Canadian stages stand to lose anything if access is not given to other cultures? What bridges do we need to build?

This is how The Conversation is being framed in 2012? We worry that "these" influences will cause us to lose "our" identities and histories? Whose identities and whose histories? Is The Conversation so underdeveloped that it neglects even at its starting point to include culturally diverse artists in its imagined "us" and "we" and relegates "these [presumably non-European] influences" to Otherness from the onset?

The Conversation about diversity and the theatre is like any conversation about power, privilege, and minority group recognition: it is at its core about social (in)justice. It is about immediate barriers to resources and long-established prejudices that have become enshrined at systemic levels. It is situated within a wider conversation about recognition and cultural pluralism. When players come together to have The Conversation, be it in formal or in informal settings, there must be a baseline level of literacy in the room with regards to social (in)justice, or The Conversation will remain stuck in first gear as it brings everyone up to speed.

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WHO IS CANADIAN AND WHAT IS CANADIAN THEATRE?

Both within its own borders and around the world, people speak of Canada as a multicultural country. What exactly is

meant by "multicultural," however, is neither precise nor universally agreed upon. There are three ways in which Canadian multiculturalism can be understood. First, Canada can be seen as multicultural in demographic fact: First Nations communities, descendants of English and French settlers, generations of other cultural communities, and new immigrants from around the world all combine to form the Canadian populace. Second, national policy, often cited as "big-M Multiculturalism," declares Canada to be a multicultural state. As growing ethnocultural communities mobilized for recognition in the mid-1900s, the state responded, first with a national policy of multiculturalism in 1971 and eventually the official 1982 Multicultural Act. The third way of interpreting Canada's multiculturalism is in the ideological conception of a pluralist nation, where the many cultures that make up the country coexist, perhaps dialectically, with no single culture held as superior to any other. This third point is an ideal that has not yet been realized in the dominant Eurocentric Canadian monoculture. In her 2011 book *Us, Them and Others*, Elke Winter asks if the Canadian "we" is imagined as multicultural in the popular imagination, and her empirical investigation of newspaper media concludes that in fact the mainstream public rarely describes a national "we" that includes cultural pluralism.

The need for cultural communities to be meaningfully recognized in a demographically pluralist society such as Canada is a matter of human rights. In his seminal essay *The Politics of Recognition*, Charles Taylor contends that "nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being." Recognition, he explains, is a part of human identity, and "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor 25). Winter's conclusion that Canada's "we" is not imagined as multicultural indicates that cultural misrecognition and/or nonrecognition continues to disempower culturally diverse Canadians.

Does the Canadian theatre industry imagine its "we" as culturally pluralist?

Although the narrative of Canadian theatre (and general) history often fails to recognize the early contributions of Aboriginal and culturally diverse communities, diverse groups have been part of the nation's performing arts landscape for generations. For example, Asian-Canadian theatre in Vancouver and Toronto dates back to the 1910s and 1930s (see Yoon 6) and Black Canadian theatre has a presence dating back to the 1840s (see Breon 2). The 1970s and 1980s saw the establishment of several cultural community-based theatres, multicultural theatres, and multicultural theatre organizations across Canada.

But despite the proliferation of culturally diverse theatre artists, their efforts and contributions continue to be excluded from consciousness. In classrooms, green rooms, and meeting rooms, I have heard people recycle the myth that non-white communities are not interested in creating theatre. The cumulative impact of this nonrecognition invariably serves to exclude culturally diverse artists from participation in the industry. At Puente's symposium, Natasha Joachim of Calgary's Afro-Canadian theatre company Ellipsis Tree said her cultural community was not uninterested in theatre, but rather the theatre to them seemed inaccessible: "The theatre is not for us." Arguing that non-whites are uninterested in theatre erases the contributions of diverse artists and distracts us from the underlying structures of power in the industry that privilege the participation of certain voices over others.

To talk about cultural diversity and the theatre, we need to first collectively recognize the history of these artists in "our" theatre ecology and the value of their contributions to date. To discuss culturally diverse artists paternalistically or as if they do not yet exist is tantamount to not actually having The Conversation at all. When we imagine "our" theatre we must include both those in the centre and in the periphery.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY "CULTURALLY DIVERSE AND ABORIGINAL ARTISTS"?

I had a friend casually remark to me over a beer, "I just don't like Aboriginal theatre. Is that racist?" I tried to give him the benefit of the doubt, quietly brainstorming reasons that might have led him to make this conclusion in an informed way. *Have you identified aesthetic conventions often employed by Aboriginal directors that you find disagreeable? Are you unable to find resonance with narratives presented from an Aboriginal world view?* When asked to elaborate, my friend simply indicated he didn't like George Ryga and could take or leave Tomson Highway.

To offer a kind understatement, this is an incomplete assessment of Aboriginal theatre in Canada. Yvette Nolan writes that when Ryga, the son of Ukrainian immigrants, wrote *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, "the door opened at that moment for an indigenous theatre, through which [white] writers like George F. Walker, David French, and Sharon Pollock walked" but "it would be another 15 years before First Nations playwrights began to appear on Canadian stages, telling their own stories" (2). Tomson Highway, Canada's single most famous Aboriginal playwright, is very often made to bear the burden of representation of the entire Aboriginal Canadian theatre world. Nolan says, "to this day, Aboriginal theatre practitioners sit on panels and committees with non-Native colleagues whose entire experience with Aboriginal theatre in this country is [Highway's play] *The Rez Sisters*." How can we discuss Aboriginal theatre, or culturally diverse theatre, when we are not even literate in the breadth and diversity of what this work entails?

WHAT IS THE PROFESSIONAL REALITY FOR CULTURALLY DIVERSE AND ABORIGINAL ARTISTS?

To quote comedian Nile Seguin, "Racism is like the social Snuffalupagus. You see it every day, yet no one believes you." We cannot have The Conversation if we do not at minimum acknowledge the power and privilege that permeate Canadian society along identity-based lines. This inequality is tangible and persistent, as it for example allows white men to make an average of $20,123 annually more than racialized women (Galabuzi). The arts sector is not immune from these inequalities, where visible minority artists make 11% less than those of the mainstream, and Aboriginal artists make 28% less (Capriotti and Hill) .

Despite this reality, illusions of a post-racial world persist. Another friend, over a different beer, confessed his exasperation with equity funding programs for culturally diverse and Aboriginal artists. "It's like reverse racism," he said. This judgment is emblematic of how the arena of professional artistic practice resists acknowledging the cultural normativity that impedes certain artists from full participation (and the corresponding need for affirmative action programs like the Equity Office) by framing itself as a liberalistic cutthroat meritocracy. A liberal society defines its boundaries "not in terms of culture or tradition, but as the

© Rocky Road Photography / Wangsu Ma, *The White Boned Demon*

> **"HOW CAN WE DISCUSS ABORIGINAL THEATRE, OR CULTURALLY DIVERSE THEATRE, WHEN WE ARE NOT EVEN LITERATE IN THE BREADTH AND DIVERSITY OF WHAT THIS WORK ENTAILS?"**

agreement on supposedly 'neutral' procedures" that are "justified in utilitarian terms […] necessary to assure individual freedoms from constraints" (Winter 46). The Canadian theatre ecology has historically reflected this view, where the "artist" is an individual creating the best work they can and battling for roles, residencies, grant money, teaching positions, etc. in an admittedly competitive industry.

The problem with classic liberalism lies in the presumption of a playing field where no culture or tradition is privileged over another. With regard to theatre-making in Canada, the dominant British-derived culture plays a significant role in dictating the conventions and standards of an individual's perceived artistic ability. Axiomatically, "artistic excellence" is a culturally normative concept; there are no rules inherent in the cosmos that govern what is or is not artistically meritorious, or how a work may or may not resonate with an audience member. What Western culture has instead is a foundational canon of classic works whose presumed worth is so deeply engrained in the collective unconscious that it is often mistaken for scientific fact. Shakespeare is studied by theatre students on all continents—but is this because he was the best playwright to have ever lived, or because he is regarded as the best *English* playwright to have ever lived and the British merely did the best job of imposing worldwide cultural influence through the colonizing of a record number of lands and peoples? The visible minority artist deals with all of the same challenges facing theatre artists in liberal society, but must further negotiate their Otherness in a white, Eurocentric theatre ecology.

How can we move past the cultural normativity of Canadian theatre when we do not take the time to reflect on and acknowledge that this normativity exists?

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MAINSTREAM AND THE MARGINALIZED?

Edmonton's Wishbone Theatre's recently hosted "Mapping Cultures: Engaging Artistic Expression in Edmonton," a great initiative designed in part to address questions about who can speak for whom when minority cultures are represented on stage. Although it was a stimulating Conversation, the general tone made apparent to me that the central question—"Who can speak for whom?"—does not sit well with liberal conceptions of the artist. The artist in liberal society should be able to create the art they want and tell whatever stories they want, even (if not especially) when the stories belong to others. That's what most theatre is, after all: people pretending to be other people. Art, however, does not exist within a post-colonial vacuum. The West has a long history of reducing and commodifying the Other in a variety of media, and when artists from the mainstream are afforded the liberty to unilaterally represent the marginalized (and profit from these representations) without horizontal consultation, we only perpetuate these asymmetrical relations. Some of the most commercially successful theatre in past years have exemplified such cultural appropriation—the Orientalism of *Miss Saigon* and the neo-minstrelsy of *Show Boat*, which came to Toronto in the 1990s via the Mirvishes and Livent Inc., respectively, come to mind. The aforementioned beginnings of Aboriginal theatre in Canada provide other examples. The Western inclination is to frame social reality "in ways consistent with European ideals of desirability, normality, and acceptability, while dismissing alternative frames or perspectives as inferior, irrelevant, or threatening" (Fleras 44).

When community-engaged artists argue that stories are best told by those who have lived them, it is not meant to homogenize or ghettoize all who identify with a given culture, nor is it to suggest that an individual artist can or should bear the burden of representing her entire culture. As Edward Said wrote, "No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points" (336). However, if we as theatre practitioners want to engage in cross-cultural storytelling, we will only move forward when we first consider how subaltern and dominant cultures are connected through legacies of power imbalance, and that these past relationships continue to have ramifications in the present. By all means, The Conversation can include debates about metonymy and mimesis, how to best stage traumatic stories, and the relationship between a story and its storyteller. But let us approach these debates with a mindfulness of the histories and economies that surround cultural representation in a post-colonial world.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CHANGE AND BY PROGRESS?

Canada's "big-M" Multiculturalism is a product of liberal society. Smaro Kamboureli describes Multiculturalism as practising a "sedative politics, a politics that attempts to recognize ethnic differences but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them," and thus professes pluralism without actually "disturbing the conventional articulation of the Canadian dominant society" (82). A Multiculturalism that limits the definition of cultural identity to food and clothing preferences obscures the systemic issues—like racism, xenophobia, and Eurocentricism—that underlie the need for such policy in the first place. This manifests in the performing arts as white bodies, and Eurocentric narratives are privileged as baseline "Canadian" while racialized bodies and diasporic and Aboriginal narratives are relegated to Otherness, at best tokenized and at worst deemed incompatible with normative Canadiana.

In popular conversations about cultural diversity and the theatre, the dialogue has tended to focus on skin colour, visible minority actors, and colour-blind or "non-traditional" casting: the Canadian Theatre Critics Association hosted a 2010 panel on Non-Traditional Casting and Criticism, and the theatre media buzzes when classics are produced with multicultural casts. Non-traditional casting has been an important stride toward equity for non-white actors, but is far from the core issues and in some ways functions like a "big-M" policy of containment. All colour-blind casting in itself allows is for racialized individuals to be participants in a still-dominant white theatre. With respect to culturally diverse characters, sociologist Augie Fleras writes, "Minorities are rendered acceptable by media if their appearance or actions

coincide with mainstream expectations or values [...] minorities whose differences are perceived as problematic are whitewashed by sanitizing them for mainstream palates" (66). Colour-blind casting can thus be seen as yet another way of containing diversity, for it masks the deeper issue of truly culturally diverse roles and voices on stage. The focus on colour-blind casting is an oversimplification that brands the conversation as a (liberal) tale of individuals with different skin colours finding ways to work together, when it instead needs to be an analysis of how groups have had unequal access to creating social narratives, rooted in a history of nonrecognition and misrecognition. The Conversation of equity and equality in the Canadian theatre demands a vocabulary of social justice more nuanced than what liberal ideology will allow.

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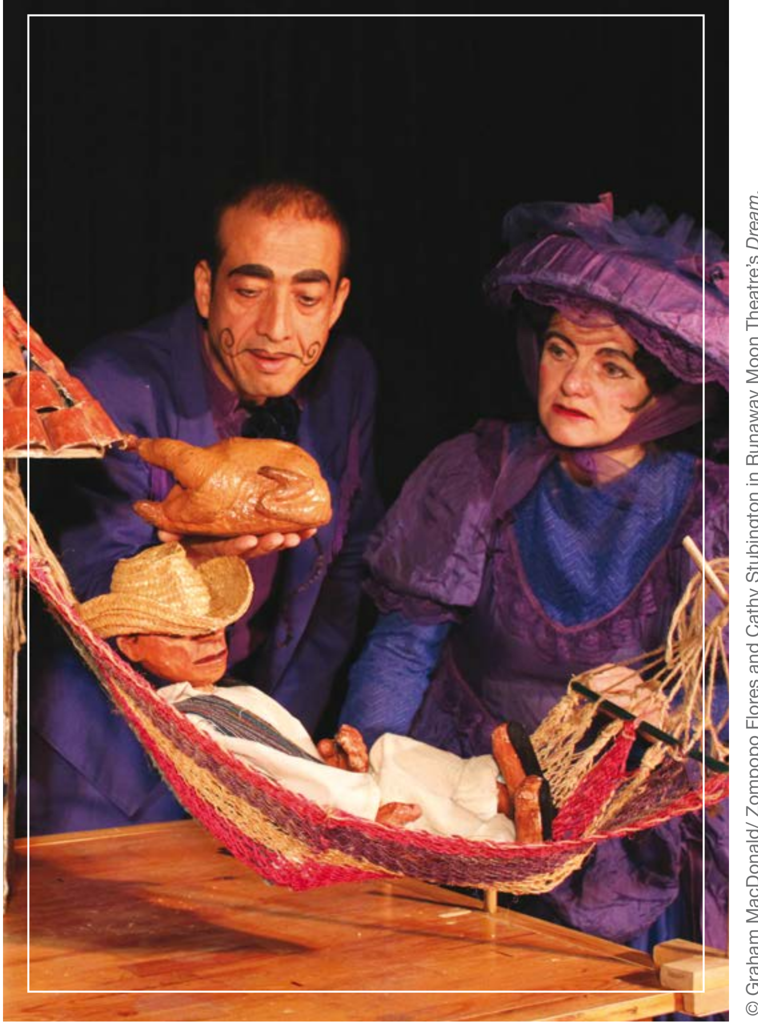

© Graham MacDonald/ Zompopo Flores and Cathy Stubington in Runaway Moon Theatre's *Dream*.

Reading the first panel description at Puente's symposium, I was concerned that the whole allocated time for this Conversation would be spent reviewing the basics, as the room came to a collective understanding of why we were having The Conversation at all. To an extent, it was. But, as a group, we moved forward as best as we could. As Ted Little said in his opening address at the symposium, "For as long as the neoliberal myth has been under construction, community-engaged artists have been dedicated to representation for and by the marginalized, countering the isolation of the individual, and providing a voice in defense of the Common Good." The Conversation during that first panel as well as the rest of the programming did succeed in provoking new questions and creating a framework for artists to share their current challenges and successes. In the panel "Training: The Performer in a Multicultural Society," Majdi Bou-Matar, Krystal Cook, Janis Dunning, and the audience had a heated but productive Conversation about the lack of cultural diversity in theatrical training institutions and the Eurocentric foundations upon which these institutions operate. Theatre SKAM presented the tremendous one-man show *Cariboo Buckaroo*, which Matthew Payne devised in close cooperation with members of British Columbia's Cariboo-Chilcotin community. The performance was followed by an uplifting Conversation about how to construct meaningful intercultural partnerships. During the panel "The Importance of Partnership and Collaboration," Diane Roberts of urban ink and Valerie Wong of Visceral Visions described a forthcoming project between their companies and the Vancouver Playhouse, an inspiring example of horizontal collaboration between artistic groups with different levels of economic clout.

The Vancouver Playhouse, however, announced in March that it would be forced to shut down. The fact that one of the country's largest and oldest regional theatres has closed is simultaneously sad and symptomatic of the need for the Canadian theatre industry to critically reexamine its modes of operation. Arts funding and ticket sales are low; reflexivity should be high. The industry must ensure it is truly relevant to contemporary Canadian society in all its diverse colour and character, both as a matter of social justice and as the key to the industry's survival. We need to continue to have Conversations and take action inspired by our discussions. But we must remember the importance of contemplation before we sit down for conversation. Working to build a Canadian theatre that reflects Canadian society will enrich our collective practice and restore popular faith in the art as a necessary and vital part of civic society.

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ANTIGONE: ANATOMY OF A DRAMA ON A FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITY

BY FLOYD FAVEL

© Milton Tootoosis / Summer of 2010 Protest at PCN Band Office

If I have any unique insight into theatre in a First Nations community, it would be very practical and real and not an idealization, because I live in one, speak the language, and am deeply involved in all aspects of my community. Theatre on a reserve is not a straightforward matter, as you shall see later in this article.

In our communities, ancient ceremonies that keep the world in balance are still practised and the remnants of our languages and cultures still survive. A First Nations community—or a reserve, if you will—is an artificial construct, imposed by the Crown after the signing of Treaty 6, which allowed the Crown access to our lands. These reserves are mainly funded by money from Aboriginal Affairs, and most of the jobs and opportunities for the people living within the confines of the reserve are controlled by the chief. Access to and control of these funds give the chiefs control over the lives and destiny of their people, who live in poverty and by rights are entitled to these funds as part of their inheritance. This is a system that is ripe for abuse, as has been the case on my reserve, Poundmaker Reserve in Saskatchewan. Here, our leaders have imposed a dictatorship and use the reserve's communal resources as their own private assets, transgressions that are well documented.

In October 2010, I submitted a grant to the Saskatchewan Arts Board to produce a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* adapted by Cree playwright, lawyer, and fellow Poundmaker Reserve member Deanne Kasokeo for the spring of 2011. My intentions were innocent: to stimulate my reserve by putting on a show and to create a project that would provide jobs for locals and for ourselves. This adaptation had originally been produced in Regina as a staged reading back in 1998—to no great fanfare. It was to be different this time, as we were to find out.

At this time it is necessary to give the reader a brief background and the socio-politico-cultural context of the conflict in which our drama became embroiled later on. For the past twenty years, our community has been ruled by an unaccountable leadership. Our leaders have consistently refused to give full financial disclosure. It was because of this that in 2010 a group of reserve members, including me and Deanne, implemented our traditional band custom electoral system and voted our leadership out of office.

It was a tumultuous time, and the divisions in our community between those who were exploiting our reserve's financial assets and those who wanted an accountable leadership became very clear. During this time, I lived with personal threats of physical violence, and supporters of accountability were fired from their jobs and intimidated. The leaders and the Department of Indian Affairs ignored the results of this legal traditional election, and unaccountable business continued as usual in my community. This leadership was very sensitive to any public events and dialogue, and the playwright and I were labelled as "dissidents."

Later that winter, Deanne and I were contracted to lead a literacy project at the reserve school, recording and transcribing the oral history of our community, which would lead to the publishing of a book. Small groups of band members bravely came out once a week and told stories—I say bravely as twenty years of repressive leadership had created a situation where people were afraid to gather and talk. We worked enthusiastically on the project and transcribed many stories while we went about planning our *Antigone* production to open on the reserve in March 2011. In Sophocles' play, Antigone is the niece of King Creon. Creon will not allow the burial of her brother, Polynices, who had previously risen up against him in revolt. Antigone fights to have her brother buried in their city state, against King Creon's wishes. This drama is about the abuse of power.

When I originally staged this drama in 1998, I had been experimenting with applying the Lakota Winter Count system as a dramaturgical tool. This is a system of keeping count of the years—each year is distilled into one metonymic image and descriptive sentence, such as "When the Stars Fell," "When the Buffalo Fell through the Ice," "Old Woman Killed by Crow Indians." By viewing *Antigone* as a year and applying the Lakota Winter Count system upon this year, I identified the key image action as "Body of Polynices Refused Burial." This image is the central action and metonymic image for the drama, around which the other actions and images revolve.

In adaptations, it is important to never lose the essential conflict of the original drama; that is what makes an adaptation work. Without the dead body there would be no Antigone drama. Furthermore, the political power existing in the hands of one person, the King, has to parallel the current contemporary setting. On a reserve, the chief has the power to banish people or to prevent a burial—making it entirely appropriate to the situation in ancient Greece. The central image action has to be plausible, otherwise the adaptation will not work as it should. For example, in adapting Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the action and image of ingesting potion can only be adapted to other societies where potion would be consumed, such as a tribal society. Coincidentally, Deanne, paralleling the original *Antigone*, was also the niece of our reserve's Chief and had been battling him to bring justice to our reserve.

We did not have high expectations as we began rehearsals. I managed to get bookings for our drama on other reserves in the province with the thought that we could perform on the road and give my actors experience before the formal opening in our community. Due to our low budget, I had the actors learn their lines at home and rehearsed the whole troupe a few days a week, and, to save money, I gave myself the lead role.

Immediately, there were signs of problems. It never fails, I thought, there is always something, or someone, in every production. One of our actors was a member of our reserve's traditional society, the *Machanasak*. The leader of this group had theatrical aspirations. In 2010, he staged a "re-enactment" of the Battle of 1885. In this battle, Colonel Otter attacked the camp of Chief Poundmaker, and our ancestors, in self-defense, defeated a much larger military force. There was no script, very little rehearsal, and no overall vision for the production. The result, in the words of one elder, was "a mockery." Our people had fought and died not meters away, and we were presented with a parody of theatre and our history by a man who had no theatrical training.

However, we must find a way of critiquing First Nations productions beyond saying whether they were good or bad. We need an analytical tool. If we analyzed this production using the formula or theorem, *Tr (tradition) X Pr (process) = Theatre2 (theatre doubled, meaning theatre expanded by the contact with*

“Whatever this Machanasak *leader whispered into the Chief’s ear drove him into a paroxysm of rage: he threw the script onto the floor and danced in fury upon its pages, I am told.*

© Milton Tootoosis
© Denis Salter and Susan Still / Theatre of Dionysus

tradition), then we would clearly see that in this alleged reenactment, the tradition or history of the event went directly to public performance without any theatrical process. Process acts as the bridge. The theatrical result will depend on the measure of theatrical process we apply to tradition. We should be talking about and analyzing these measures of tradition and process and the actual production for the viewers and students of theatre and tradition, rather than vague subjective feelings of whether we liked a production or not. The formula or theorem will vary with each production.

During the rehearsals for *Antigone*, this *Machanasak* member came to me at the direction of the leader of this society (that is, the aspiring director of the re-enactment) to say that I must abandon the play because it was sacrilegious through its mention of the dead body of Polynices. I tried to talk some sense into this fellow and tell him that this was "just a play," but to no avail: he quit the production and I was left scrambling to replace an actor at a late stage in rehearsals.

Meanwhile, the leader of the *Machanasak* had suggested to the Chief—whose last name was Antoine—that Antigone was code for "Antoine gone," and that this play, with its story about the abuse of political power and corruption, was about him. They did not consider that this drama was written over 2400 years ago in ancient Greece ago, before there was such a thing as a Canadian reserve system. Our Chief, who is functionally illiterate, is dependent on advisors to inform him on matters that require reading, and therefore can be misled. Whatever this *Machanasak* leader whispered into the Chief's ear drove him into a paroxysm of rage: he threw the script onto the floor and danced in fury upon its pages, I am told.

Meanwhile, we had had excellent receptions touring to other reserves. In Fort Qu'Appelle, we performed in front of a gathering of elders, some of whom had been former respected chiefs. I played the chief in all seriousness in the play—raging and controlling my members—and my character became a comic character. I stomped around, threatening to fire or remove the benefits of anyone who crossed me. Following these performances during the question and answer sessions, the chiefs, in good humour, addressed me as "Chief."

Back from our successful tour, we settled into our own reserve for our opening. Then, one night, two days before our opening, we heard that the Chief had fired us from our literacy project at the school and that a band council resolution had been drawn up forbidding and banning any public performance of *Antigone* on our reserve. We waited for one of the councillors to find an alternate venue for us. The next morning, I issued a press release stating our show had been banned. It made quite the story. Calls flooded in, and our story was featured and disseminated in newspapers nationally and internationally. As I told Deanne, usually in productions we are fighting for press and publicity, but in this case we didn't even try. In one of these articles, the Chief is quoted as saying, "We don't have to answer to no one."

In history, theatre artists, writers, journalists, poets are often silenced, jailed, or killed by despotic rulers, and we were getting a glimpse of this here in Canada. But despite being obscure artists living in a community far from the major urban centres where the theatres are, our efforts were being validated. The show must go on, I told the actors.

On show day, I had been told that the Chief had taken off with the only set of keys to the hall. We waited all afternoon at my house, rehearsing our lines and waiting for new developments. Word arrived: the caretaker had allowed our show to take place at the school. The show was on! But the Chief had also maliciously told potential audience members from our community that anyone who came to our show would be fired from their jobs.

I quickly set up chairs in the gymnasium and a small audience slowly trickled in, almost all of them from off reserve. A few brave band members showed up. The late great actor Gordon Tootoosis opened the show with a few inspirational remarks, stating how proud he felt that we could have our own theatre on our reserve and how proud he was of this production and our efforts. He honoured us with his words. These words were a salve for the abuse we had suffered from our leadership. God bless his memory. Sadly, this was to be one of my last encounters with my cousin and theatre colleague, Mr. Tootoosis, as he passed on into the spirit world a few months later.

The theatre Gods must have been smiling, as it was the best show we had ever put on. My theatre travels had taken me all over Europe and North America and this was the first time I had ever presented any production on my home reserve. It was a homecoming to remember. Many times, sitting and smoking a cigarette, I think of that evening and a bitterness overwhelms me when I remember all of the trouble we went through—all because of the small-minded pettiness that blocked this production. Theatre has never been so relevant.

As a postscript, the Chief and council were charged with over forty counts of fraud and other criminal actions later that summer and will be going to court in the coming year. Not unlike the characters in ancient Greek tragedies, they are reaping the results of their hubris and abuse of power—although they are innocent until proven guilty. Sometimes, when I see how we govern ourselves, I wonder what will happen to our people. The elders were right. Long ago they said that money would ruin our people and we would fight like dogs over this money. As First Nations, we are deeply affected by centuries of colonization, and today we can be just as corrupt and selfish as the rest of humanity. It's not the whiteman whom we must fear; it is our own people who can try to silence us, ban us, or destroy us.

No matter what, though, our communities are beautiful places, good places to raise our children, where the sacred drums of our People still sound. This is where our ancestors are buried and where they look down upon us, in our joy and in our sadness, as we go forward to our uncertain futures.

THE TREE OF COMMUNITY ART PRACTICE
REFLECTIONS ON A RESIDENT ART PRACTICE IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

BY SAVANNAH WALLING

© David Cooper / DTES *Romeo and Juliet*

Over thirty-five years ago, Terry Hunter and I planted into the creative soil of the Downtown Eastside a seed that has grown into Vancouver Moving Theatre's tree of community art practice.

Today this tree shelters and nourishes artists working with a community and a community working with artists in all kinds of collaborative relationships, giving birth to new art made with, for, and about the Downtown Eastside. The tree absorbs and sprouts from what is already in place: the neighbourhood's diversity and accumulated wisdom. Its roots probe through multiple layers, cultural landscapes, and social systems, seeking understanding and connection. The tree's branches weave individuals and groups into mutually beneficial relationships. Its trunk supports art-creation that celebrates, challenges, commemorates, educates, and heals. The tree grows through over-lapping phases of research and development, creation, and production before seeding legacies for the community, the next generation of artists, and other communities facing similar challenges.

Here is our story of the evolution of a Downtown Eastside tree of community art practice.

Looking for an affordable home in 1975, Terry and I moved into the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver's founding neighbourhood situated on ancestral unceded Coast Salish territory between Burrard Inlet and the False Creek Flats. Here we discovered a diverse, largely low income community filled with people from different walks of life, circumstance, and culture. Before the Downtown Eastside was clear-cut one hundred and twenty-seven years ago, it was home to the tallest and oldest trees in Canada. Today the area is home to the largest urban Aboriginal unofficial "reserve" in Canada and the second largest historic Chinatown in North America: an entry point for immigrants and young families, a working and retirement home for resource workers, a haven for middle class professionals who value sustainability over growth, a sanctuary for artists and the marginalized, and site of major events in Vancouver's history.

The Downtown Eastside has been a gathering place of vastly differing governance systems, cultural traditions, and art practices. Like a biologically diverse forest filled with "trees" of all kinds and sizes, the community's diversity has been the source of its health, its fiercely productive creativity, and its divisive polarities—as well as its historic struggles and capacity for survival. In the words of Nathan Edelson, "The Downtown Eastside is a community that has experienced great suffering, but it is also a community that has demonstrated incredible resilience, determination, and innovation."[1]

During our first years in the neighbourhood, Terry and I explored fusions of dance, music, and theatre within the avant-garde dance collective Terminal City Dance. By 1983 the company could no longer contain the expanding visions of its collective and it split apart into three entities: the Vancouver Dance Centre, Karen Jamieson Dance Company, and Vancouver Moving Theatre.

Terry and I co-founded Vancouver Moving Theatre (VMT) to house our inter-disciplinary art form, and to fulfill our dream of bridging barriers between cultures and connecting artistic practice with community. But it took fifteen years of touring drum dances and mask dramas before we stayed at home long enough for the dormant seed to sprout into six years of small-scale Strathcona Artist at Home Festivals (1998-2004). Through this festival we uncovered a rich vein of artists, history, cultures, and great stories. The more we learned and the more we participated, the more involved, inter-connected, and committed to our community we became. We began the slow journey of transforming from artists living in the Downtown Eastside to artists nurturing and being nurtured by this community.[2]

As we became connected to our community, our eyes opened to its beauty and the challenges stemming from poverty, self-reliance, and being treated as a dumping ground for the city's problems. Over the years we've seen significant changes. A powerful partnership among developers, real estate investors, labour unions, and government has driven land development and rezoning, leveraging investment with mega-projects like Expo 86 and the 2010 Olympics. Insensitive development has threatened the community's identity, human scale, and heritage, and has displaced residents. Policing actions in the 1970s that moved prostitution from indoors out onto the streets coincided with a series of murders and disappearances of sex trade workers. The traumatic legacy of Indian residential schools, the downsizing of mental hospitals, welfare rate reduction policies, privatizing and off-shoring of jobs, and the loss of affordable housing all correlated with a surge in visible poverty, survival sex trade and property crime, homelessness, and self-medicating on all levels of society. Furthermore, a new drive-by drug market spiralled out of control as Vancouver plugged into the global drug markets.

During the 1990s, new grassroots initiatives rose to lobby for systemic changes. Their goals were to make the neighbourhood a healthier place to live and to contribute through arts to restoring culture and transforming community. When residents engage in their community and culture, neighbourhoods start to heal and move forward. Vancouver finally opened a supervised drug injection facility—the first in North America. Artists, activists, and organizations participated in collective actions for community-led renewal during the one hundredth anniversary of the Carnegie Community Centre building at Hastings and Main.

The Carnegie Community Centre invited Vancouver Moving Theatre to co-produce a community play created for, with, and about the neighbourhood. Although the task was too big, timelines too short, and financial resources insufficient, we knew that our community, although negatively sensationalized by media across Canada, had tremendous talent. It was our turn to give back. Everyone involved hoped the project could bridge barriers of language, culture and social differences in a community experiencing serious threats to its survival.

Our community partner asked us to work with the community play principle discovered by British playwright Ann Jellicoe (1977). We agreed and visited Cathy Stubington and the community of Enderby to learn more about the process.[3] In this kind of community play, a small core of experienced theatre artists work with community volunteers—as many as wish to participate—to create artistic work that expresses and celebrates their community. Jellicoe had discovered an art-making process whose guiding principles replicate nature's principles for building healthy eco-systems: diversity, interconnectivity, and interdependence.

Establishing a healthy root system is fundamental when organizing a diverse group of people to co-produce something

that comes in on schedule and budget, navigates bumps, and is artistically coherent and meaningful. It took a month of negotiating with the Carnegie staff to agree upon the community play's goals and guiding principles; expectations around social, cultural, gender diversity and bridge-building; and definitions of "Downtown Eastside," "community member," and "community play."

The responsibilities were overwhelming for everyone involved.[4] As resident artists we couldn't leave after the play was finished; we would have to live with the consequences and so would our community. We learned on the job. We asked for help. We learned about community values and traditional protocols. Undertaking the massive project was an act of trust by all involved.

The experience wasn't perfect. All the challenges of producing big collaborative plays were present: from people who didn't got along, got sick, weren't prepared or didn't understand English, to security issues, family emergencies, people with post-traumatic stress, robberies, computer crashes, evictions, mental health and drug issues, and aesthetic and cultural differences. But together we created an imperfect miracle. The audiences loved it. "A vibrant Downtown Eastside theatre community has been created," said poet Sandy Cameron in the Carnegie Newsletter (1 Nov 2003). "People are getting to know each other. People connected to the play are greeting each other on the street. They know their play reflects the strength, pain and beauty of our multicultural Downtown Eastside that rises like a phoenix, from one generation to the other."

Co-producing *In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play* (2003) turned out to be transformative for Terry, myself, and Vancouver Moving Theatre. This was the moment when the creative seedling planted in the 1970s grew a deep and strong taproot, the foundation of our tree of community art practice. Guidelines inspired by Jellicoe's play process and co-developed with the Carnegie Community Centre have guided our evolving practice in the Downtown Eastside ever since.

When art projects end, the abrupt loss of daily rituals, social meetings, and meaningful work is rough on people in marginalized circumstances. After the community play ended, participants were hungry for more. Terry and I owed another big debt of gratitude. We had barely scratched the surface of the community's stories. How ethical is it, we wondered, to do big community-engaged projects without sustaining follow-up and—in the words of Ruth Howard—"continuity or attentive wind-down"? What could we give back as thanks after the project was over? Whose responsibility was it? The artists? Community partner? Funding agencies? The community? The answer: All of the above.

The success of the community play stimulated new growth: an annual, massively inclusive creative opportunity. In 2004, assisted by funding from the City of Vancouver and from Friends of the Downtown Eastside,[5] the Carnegie Community Centre partnered with VMT to co-produce the first Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival: an annual twelve-day celebration of artists, art forms, cultural traditions, history, activism, people, and stories about the neighbourhood.

Out of the play's deep taproot extended the festival's wide, spreading roots. Its programs are developed by collaborative consensus with community partners and artists, some of whom partner with additional organizations for additional support. The most recent 2011 festival involved over 40 community partners, 30 venues, 100 events, and 1000-plus artists, from novices to cultural treasures.

As its roots extend, this tree of community arts practice grows taller and stronger, producing new flowers: smaller scale collaborative productions,[6] mini-festivals around specific cultural communities, a national community play conference, leadership training institutes,[7] creative partnerships with Runaway Moon and Jumblies Theatre, and professional co-productions incorporating job opportunities for community play participants. These projects and the funds they have drawn into the neighbourhood help us to give back to the community in the form of more creative opportunities.

Like a biologically diverse forest filled with "trees" of all kinds and sizes, the community's diversity has been the source of its health, its fiercely productive creativity, and its divisive polarities—as well as its historic struggles and capacity for survival.

Some flowers disseminated wild seed that have germinated into cross participation and new growth.[8] Participants have gone on to create plays, concerts, exhibits, and history walks; to get more education, and jobs onstage, backstage, or teaching; to participate in arts or activism projects; and to sit on boards of non-profit organizations. The taller the tree, the deeper the roots it requires to stand firm in the torrents of life. Vancouver Moving Theatre collaborates with art and non-arts organizations in partnerships that intertwine our individual roots for cross-support, interconnection, and sharing of resources. We negotiate to co-determine goals, guiding principles, expectations, responsibilities, and in-kind contributions: this dance balances the needs of individuals, organizations, and the community as a whole.

Anyone can dig a hole and plant a seed. But as resident Bessie Lee said, "After one plants nice creative seeds in a field, they must be protected and nourished in order to provide a good harvest." Each creative plant has its own development timeline, personality, and needs. A plant that grows too fast doesn't develop strong roots to anchor it in place. And roots push down before leaves grow.

Artists are the leaves in our tree of community art practice, absorbing nourishment from the community as they co-create new art. Terry and I look for artists who are experts in what they do, enjoy working collaboratively, care about the project's purpose, like the neighbourhood, support its values, and are ready to learn from it. We ask them to avoid taking sides on local issues

in the rehearsal hall and to steer past negativity by sticking to arts and theatre protocol. In the words of director James Fagan Tait, as professional artists in a community-engaged process, "we have to be fully prepared at each rehearsal, to support and speak with respect to the cast members at every stage of the process, [and] to work out differences with members of the artistic team at another time and place without intruding on the rehearsal process."

We ask the artists to help devise creative structures with room for community input, locally generated images, and opportunities to perform and build. We cast Anglo, Asian, Aboriginal, Latino and Black participants to honour our community's demographics. We cast participants in roles and contexts to match talents and temperaments, and encourage them to work as a team to bypass blocks that stop the flow of expression and to move past preconceived limitations.

Ordinary individuals, when challenged and provided with opportunities and support, are capable of creating the extraordinary. Well organized, smoothly running, safe, fun, and inclusive environments encourage everyone—from novice to professional—to give of their best and to respect the work of others. Small everyday courtesies help big time on big projects. So do strategies that defuse tense situations in ways that leave everyone's dignity intact and fresh, nutritious refreshments presented in a respectful manner. As artist Rosemary Georgeson reminds us "problems diminish by sharing and feasting."

community and its concerns. We try to never promise more than we can deliver.

Determining the scale of a project, its collaborative structure, artistic disciplines, balance of experimentation, and accessibility and community-engagement protocol is always an enormous challenge. So is nourishing artistic excellence and community process, giving value to each with funding, staffing, and resources. Too often, artists are overworked, productions need more rehearsal time and staff, and artistic visions are bigger than available resources. Not all affordable venues are wheel-chair accessible. Some places require front door security. Some people don't like to go to certain neighbourhoods or venues. People can be on different "meds," self-medicating, or in recovery. Some have personal hygiene or memory issues. Occasionally someone's been too dangerous or disruptive to participate. If they're verbally abusive, we move them out right away or others will be afraid. The challenge is to do this in a way that is respectful, does not humiliate, and leaves the person with the ability to come back at another time or in another context

Before starting new projects we take time to learn how our partners' community functions, its parts relate, and its connections act and interact. We co-design projects that suit their situation, values, and resources in order to develop meaningful relationships and work in support of each other, taking the time to learn and observe carefully before we act. The reason so many projects

Anyone can dig a hole and plant a seed. But as resident Bessie Lee said, "After one plants nice creative seeds in a field, they must be protected and nourished in order to provide a good harvest."

have been successfully realized and had a long-lasting impact is that everyone from professionals to novices worked hard and with mutual respect most of the time, coped respectfully with inevitable bumps, gave of their best, forgave mistakes, and really, really wanted the stories to be told and the projects to succeed. The resulting aesthetic is often raw, refined, and heart-felt. The successes are rooted in relationships of trust and cross-support developed over thirty years in a community Terry and I have come to love and respect. Learning from our mistakes, we take small steps in creating art that excites us, involves and engages people from our community, acknowledges our sources, and challenges negative stereotypes about the place we live.

Within our limited resources, we provide fees for professional artists; honorariums for heavily involved community participants and performers; leadership training in exchange for in-kind service; mentoring, coaching, and skill-building opportunities for veteran play participants; participatory experiences for novices; limited involvement opportunities for community choirs and volunteers; refreshments, thank-you meals, and occasionally child care. When tough issues are involved, we have provided a peer counsellor with experience around these issues. We encourage social mixing; we don't exclude people because of dress or everyday behaviour. Most events are free or by donation; we distribute complimentary or low-cost community tickets for ticketed events. We program street events during the Heart of the City Festival.

Working in "alliance" is a key principle in our strategy and survival as resident artists in the Downtown Eastside. Our work with social systems already in place is non-adversarial. We meet with artists and partnering organizations to learn how we can work with each other and what each can contribute, establishing with the lead artists a collaborative process that suits the community, the project, their working style, and the resources. We attach theme-related events to existing programs, and hire outreach workers who have lived and worked in the neighbourhood and understand its concerns. The art we co-create is about stories and images of this neighbourhood—a community that isn't represented in mainstream art—incorporating aesthetic practices and forms outside the "high art" gates. And our documentation breaks out details of the collaborative process and contexts the

We know that art offers no hard and fast solutions for the complexities of the human condition and its relationship to the lands and waters of this planet. Depending upon intention and context, art can empower, re-connect and heal or help displace, marginalize and scapegoat. We can't control or stop the process of change, but we can make the best of our situations and advocate for healthier choices. In an unhealthy community, resources are used up faster than they can be replaced. Benefits are privatized and costs are born solely by the community. Loss of diversity results in vulnerability to change whether from scarcity or glut. A profoundly unequal world is profoundly out of balance—it is unsustainable.

An unhealthy arts practice is also unsustainable. Artists burn out. Self-care is essential when operating under conditions of unpredictability, stress, and overload. How do I cope? I alternate big and small projects. Do my homework in advance. Pay attention to what is said and done, prepared to adjust or abandon

plans. When overwhelmed, I focus on one step at a time. If I can't solve the problem immediately, I allow myself to postpone it. I preserve time for my family (especially suppers). I journal, sing, and go for long walks, taking big steps in the open air. I reach out to friends and colleagues I trust. I remind myself to plan as if I'm going to live forever and to live each moment as if I'm going to die tomorrow.

Nature's systems teach us how to build healthy communities and a healthy community arts practice. Mature forests are resilient, healthy habitats, with aesthetic appeal and renewable resources. An old growth forest has many kinds of trees, young and old, growing together to ensure that diverse species will survive. This complexity of habitats nourishes opportunities to interact, providing a wealth of raw material to adapt to changing circumstances. Old growth forests bring energy into an area, preserve diversity, store resources to recycle into the system, reproduce without damaging or depleting the environment, and provide shelter and support for the next generation. Fallen decaying trees serve as nurse logs for new seedlings.[9]

Why do some communities vanish while others stay strong, why do some preserve their unique identities while others lose them? It is about inter-connection, roots, diversity, cross pollination, succession, balancing the needs of individuals and the community as a whole, preserving relationships. In the words of Downtown Eastside poet/activist Sandy Cameron, "We work to make our community a better place, not a perfect place, but a better place. If we look for immediate results in this work, we are in danger of falling into despair. Society doesn't change quickly and our commitment is for the long haul."[10] Our community's stories help us draw strength from the past, to feel proud of our history and who we are, to have the courage to keep going and to never, ever lose hope.

As Terry and I enter our sixth decade of life, we think a lot about transferring information and passing on the torch. Even when a tree falls, it is only halfway through life. It continues to have the capacity to shelter, to nourish the earth with nutrients as it decays, leaving its legacy: a seedbed for new creation. Whether or not we successfully pass a sustainable festival onto a new director, we are working on written and audiovisual legacies to serve as creative seed to nourish new generations of artists. We are exploring with community partners opportunities for a more deeply rooted sustainability for Downtown Eastside arts than gambling upon gaming and the largesse of corporations.

Our trees of community art practice—the culture we carry, the art we create—show how we can come together despite seeming differences to reverse collective forgetting so communities see themselves clearly reflected in their own light, rather than through the distorted images of other people's mirrors. In rediscovering healthy aspects of our home and culture, all of us recover a sense of ownership, pride, and destiny; motivation to protect our communities; and wisdom to preserve them for future generations. You cannot leave it to other people to take care of your community.

"It's the people who make our community beautiful," said poet Sandy Cameron, "and they do it be reaching out to each other and helping each other. Even as the giant fir is nurtured by its roots, so our community of the Downtown Eastside is nurtured by its members."[11]

Guiding Principles of VMT's Tree of Community Art Practice

+ Involve culturally diverse professional artists engaging in their art practice with a community;
+ Create art from inception through completion with, by, and for that community;
+ Partner artists and arts organizations with non-art organizations;
+ Build projects of all sizes and shapes, from performing to visual arts, media arts, processions, and community celebrations;
+ Support community members with a variety of art-making and capacity-building opportunities;
+ Integrate art making with a community's stories and concerns, images and traditions, assets and hopes;
+ Intertwine process and product—all part of the art; Cultivate respectful, inclusive environments;
+ Encourage everybody involved—from novice to master—to give of their best;
+ Relate to the whole community, including Aboriginal, Asian, and Anglo;
+ Result in a transformative experience;
+ Leave a legacy for the future.

NOTES

1 Acceptance speech on behalf of the Honourable Jim Green by former city planner Nathan Edelson to the Planning Institute of BC, 5 November 2011.
2 See my article, "Excavating Yesterday: The Birth, Growth and Evolution of a Resident Artist in the Downtown Eastside," *alt.theatre* 7.2 (2009): 24-28.
3 The community play form was brought to Ontario by Dale Hamilton (1990) who inspired Cathy Stubington to create a community play in Enderby, BC (1998), in turn inspiring the Downtown Eastside. See Ann Jellicoe, *Community Plays: How to Put Them On* (Methuen, 1987).
4 See my article, "The Downtown Eastside Community Play," *alt.theatre* 3.4 (2005): 12-15.
5 Friends of the Downtown Eastside is a group of business leaders supportive of grass roots community-led renewal in the Downtown Eastside
6 See, for example, my article, "We're All in This Together: Negotiating Collaborative Creation in a Play About Addiction," *alt.theatre* 5.4 (2008): 14-20.
7 See my dispatch, "Reflections on a cross-country collaboration in community arts training," *alt.theatre* 7.3 (2010): 31.
8 See Leath Harris, "The Magic Circle," *alt.theatre* 4.1 (2006): 9-10, 15.
9 Toronto's Jumblies Theatre acts as a giant nursing log for new trees of community art practice with its generous and visionary start-up support of resources, knowledge, mentoring, and interning.
10 Sandy Cameron, "Longing for Light," Carnegie Newsletter, 15 July 2009.
11 Sandy Cameron, "Dear Friends, Thank You," Carnegie Newsletter, 4 August 2010.

Burlesque is said to have been revived from its glittery grave in the mid-1990s in San Francisco by a woman named Michelle Carr and her company The Velvet Hammer (Lili). Almost twenty years later the burlesque revival is still going strong, with around half a dozen groups performing with some regularity in most large cities. Neo-burlesque generally follows a very particular model of striptease that harkens back to America in the 1950s. It capitalizes on nostalgia—the good old days when there was more of a "tease" to striptease. This nostalgia, like all nostalgia, is somewhat disingenuous, what Woody Allen in his film *Midnight in Paris* calls Golden Age Thinking: "The erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in" (qtd. in Steve Honig).

Bare-Assed Defiance

BY ALEX TIGCHELAAR

© David Hawe / Cat Nimmo and Alex Tigchelaar in *Les Demimondes*

The fact is, mid-twentieth century strippers, like erotic performers from any era, were burdened by the laws of their time, laws that prevented them from exposing themselves completely. Burlesque artists cleverly flouted the vice squad by creating brilliantly sequined and feathered tear-away costumes that revealed as much or as little as was permitted. This is not to say that mid-century striptease wasn't beautiful and inventive (oppression, as I've always said, is the mother of invention), but let's not idealize what these women had to go through in order to perform their job. Let's be aware of the hectic dance all sex workers must do in order to evade criminalization and stigma.

I have been involved in the neo-burlesque movement since around 1998, when I started performing with a duo called The Dangerettes. The mischievous exhibitionist in me felt an immediate affinity to this ribald, lively, and inclusive type of performance, and The Dangerettes performed steadily for a year and a half to sold out crowds at the Pilot, Lee's Palace, and many other Toronto venues. We were accompanied, in the tradition of mid-twentieth century

© Alexis Mitchell / Fluffy Soufflé, Cat Nimmo, Mariko Tamaki in *Creative Trafficking*

burlesque, by a live band. The band was called Jack the Ripper and the Major Players and included musicians from groups like Blue Rodeo, the Bourbon Tabernacle Choir, and King Kurt.

In 2000, Pussy LeMieux, my partner in The Dangerettes, started a restaurant and didn't have time for what was an invigorating but expensive hobby. Cat Nimmo, one of the women we performed with a couple of times, had caught my attention and we began a troupe called The Scandelles.

The Scandelles, like The Dangerettes, performed very typical revival burlesque: girl comes out in sequined costume, which is slowly removed with much winking and whoopsy daisying and then we're down to pasties and twirl, twirl, twirl. People loved this, and more than ten years later, they still do. There are at least four neo-burlesque troupes still performing in Toronto, some of them busy enough to do monthly or bi-monthly shows. But after fewer than two years we'd had enough of indulging nostalgia and doing the same ten acts (really the same one just with different costumes) over and over. It was also worrying to me to hear people talk about how much "sexier" burlesque was than contemporary striptease because there wasn't full nudity. I felt they were echoing sentiments they thought sounded progressive and complimentary but to me seemed more like the stifling ideas that magazines like *Playboy* capitalize on to label types of women and disgrace certain body parts. People talked about how much classier burlesque was than contemporary striptease and I didn't like this. I think we need to be conscious of what we are really saying when we talk about women's bodies and issues of class. I felt I was pandering to the very notion I set out to work against: the rarifying of female sexuality.

In 2002 I began writing a show called *Neon Nightz*, which detailed my experiences stripping in Montreal in the 1990s. This show debuted at Vazaleen (a popular queer monthly party in Toronto) with a four-piece girl band called Rocket Tits playing classic rock and several dancers performing contemporary striptease. I will be honest in saying that I can't remember if I attempted to perform monologues at that time, but if I did, it would have been an ill-advised objective in front of such an unruly crowd. Vazaleen goers were there to dance. Not hear former strippers wax on about their experiences.

In its current form, *Neon Nightz* is a three-hander that examines concepts of worship and contradictions of intimacy in the sacred yet profane places we explore desire and shame. One musician, Babs Vermeulen, performs all the music (from Leonard Cohen to AC/DC to the Afghan Whigs) while Nimmo performs acrobatic pole dancing and striptease and plays a pantheon of female characters from Mary Magdalene to Mercedes Lee to the Virgin Mary. Between dance pieces, I monologue about my experiences in the many clubs I worked at in Montreal, discussing—with some degree of theatrical fiction—exchanges I had with clients and dancers that were relevant to the themes we were exploring.

Between these two vastly different incarnations of *Neon Nightz*, we also mounted two other large-scale production at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre: *Under the Mink* and *Who's Your Dada?* We also workshopped—in the way we workshop things, with colossal casts, epic costuming, and eight thousand intentions—two others: *The Death Show* in 2010 and *Les Demimondes* in 2006 and 2011 (which was performed at Edgy Women in 2012 and will be performed at SummerWorks in August 2012). We made a film with Bruce LaBruce called *Give Piece of Ass a Chance* that screened at dozens of film festivals across the world. Our shows were being reviewed in the theatre sections in all the dailies and weeklies in Toronto.

It was official: we had transitioned from a neo-burlesque troupe to a cabaret theatre company, a form that I believe, when it is at its best, occupies the space between rigorous academia and populist thinking, and, in doing so, brings complex ideas to diverse audiences in creative ways. Cabaret theatre is often political and urgent in nature, expressing ideas that are radical and oftentimes misrepresented in more mainstream contexts. It's performed by people not typically seen onstage: openly queer, transsexual, sex working, people of different class, race, and gender backgrounds and abilities. It can be very polished or it can be a huge sloppy mess—or somewhere in between. But it is what is happening *right now*.

In *Les Demimondes*, the serviceability of cabaret theatre is truly on display because it is in this production that we find ourselves in the midst of a legal battle challenging sections of the criminal code that restrict sex work in Canada—a real-life counterpart to the show's central message. When we first mounted *Les Demimondes* six years ago, this issue was not in the news, but as sex workers and advocates of sex workers' rights, we have always been acutely aware of these laws; our status has always been predicated on criminality. Now we have an opportunity to really drive this point home to an audience that has been reading about our struggle to decriminalize our trade on a more regular basis. And we take advantage of this by inserting more contemporary legal references and scenes pulled straight from the courtrooms of the Ontario Court of Appeals (see Bedford; Canada [Attorney General]).

We look in *Les Demimondes* at the fact that you can paint a whore, make a film about a whore, and write a song about a whore, but if you are a whore, you are criminalized. The title of the show is a contraction of the words "les demimondaines," meaning "the half world dwellers." I chose this euphemism very specifically because this is precisely how it feels when one person is permitted to profit off an existence that makes another person an outlaw. In essence, *Les Demimondes* explores the fact that it is universally acceptable to create art, media, and laws about sex workers (often without their consent), but when sex workers use their own bodies to generate income, they are criminalized.

I think this is crazy. And it's not just the double standard that bugs me. It's the fact, for example, that Sting can make a blajillion dollars writing a song about a hooker by telling her to *stop* working. It's that Jeff Koons is given artistic credibility for his pieces that feature the Hungarian-born Italian porn star La Cicciolina, yet virtually the same work that she did for trashy porn magazines is considered negligible and tacky.

So what's it going to be? Is it serious artwork or is it negligible and tacky? Is it only serious because Jeff Koons, a privileged white male artist who made millions on Wall Street, gives it credibility? Is it because he can speak with artistic integrity about the work and La Cicciolina prances around offering to fuck the now deceased Osama Bin Laden to secure world peace? Koons profits off the porn star's mystique while she remains a joke. Welcome to the Demimonde, ladies and gentlemen.

The show looks at famous depictions of sex workers in the arts and media, some of whom come to life to speak about their experiences, some of whom are simply offered the dignity of being considered legitimate workers. I play Prostitution Herself, a 3000 year-old hooker, who leads the audience through select portrayals, giving insights into the real stories of these women. This character, like so many social pariahs, revels in the unvarnished truth but is also sly and prone to exaggeration. It is the half world, after all, and its citizens must keep up an air of idiosyncrasy to keep the patrons enthralled.

The idea of *Les Demimondes* all started with this quote: "You can lead a whore to culture, but you can't make her think" (qtd. in JoeBlow).

American writer Dorothy Parker said this when she was challenged to use the word horticulture in a game she used to play with her Vicious Circle cronies called I Can Give You a Sentence. Most people would have a good laugh at this witty double entendre and move along to their martini, but when I heard it my first thought was: Why would you need to lead a whore to culture? We *are* culture. Think for one moment about all of the work produced about sex workers and then ask yourself who produces these representations. I can tell you that, by and large, it is not sex workers.

These never-ending narcissistic depictions of men saving fallen women (in the show, Prostitution Herself argues that we are not fallen, rather we are pushed), the hooker with a heart of gold, the pantheon of psychopaths that defines our clients, the media that depicts us all as victims of trafficking, and if we're not trafficked we're certainly deluded. It is insidious. There are, in fact, women, men and children who are trafficked. But this is not sex work, it's kidnapping and rape. And to conflate it with what real sex workers do, people who choose this existence whether because they have a lot of choices or because they have very few, is a real crime—and one with universally fatal implications.

This is why I chose to write this show and this is why I choose cabaret as my medium: because cabaret allows me the freedom to present vignettes rather than one constant narrative, inserting new ideas as they themselves are presented to audiences outside of this framework—for example, the current legal deliberation over Canada's prostitution laws. We use video, dance, monologues, and skits, showing audience members all of the creative ways that we react to these depictions of ourselves. We can address all of the mediums that misrepresent us using the mediums themselves. We tell you our stories by telling you how we feel about the ones created without our consent.

In one vignette we show images from 1950s crime magazines of brothel raids: photograph after photograph of women hiding their faces "as their places of employment," says Prostitution Herself, "are raided and exposed to the leering masses." We then juxtapose these with images taken from my partner Cat Nimmo's website. Cat, using another alias, is also a sex worker who, early last year, was targeted by an "independent online journalist" calling himself Prostitmuse. Prostitmuse provided his faithful readers with full details about her real life: her name, the details of our company, and her burlesque name. Cat responded to this by outing him in our show and by actually addressing all the positive ways in which her job has enriched her life and those she services. Her image—once presented for consumption in this snide and treacherous fashion—was reclaimed by her.

Prostitution Herself also reclaims the song "Roxanne" by the Police, changing the lyrics from ones that implore Roxanne not to put on her red light to ones that encourage her to do so, that her body is hers to use how she chooses. She calls Sting out, asking him if he would consider providing Roxanne with the millions of pounds he made disparaging her trade in a song, seeing as he has asked her to stop making a living on her own.

Alphonsine Plessis, better known as Marie Duplessis and then La Traviata in Verdi's opera (*La Traviata*, meaning the fallen woman, was based on the play *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas, fils), makes an appearance to apprise the audience of some little known facts about her life: that she did not, as the opera implies, die of an illness that she contracted through vice, but rather through an illness she contracted as a child. It was the sin of poverty that killed her; it was through working as a courtesan that she was able to teach herself to read, write and play music, all things deprived of most women of her class (Roberts, 219-221).

As another example, we challenge a news report that was aired in Toronto last year claiming the city was teeming with underage sex workers being pimped out. The report featured all the usual trappings of the sensationalistic reporting that surrounds sex work and none of the actual findings required to prove its point. CTV reporter Tamara Cherry, despite the fact that she was unable to coerce one single worker into admitting she was pimped out (and two of the women she ambushed in a hotel room were actually in their forties, while the other was, as she stated, "young, too young"), gave a solemn account, suggesting this was an enormous problem.

We made a film in reaction to this report, dressing two actors (Daddy K and Cat Nimmo) as Julia Roberts from *Pretty Woman* and positioning them outside an art gallery. They handed out pamphlets to passersby warning them of the dangers of "Creative Trafficking." "Did you know," one of the actors says, "that when an artist makes a painting, the gallery takes up to fifty percent of that artist's income?" We took the exact script used by the original report and applied it to the art world. The implication was that many independent contractors—from hairdressers to carpenters to artists—give a portion of their income to a source that provides them space, promotion, or protection without so much patronizing commotion.

These condescending attitudes combined with flagrant lies are extremely frustrating. This is why cabaret theatre is such a vital space for social justice. It can change and bend to accommodate current issues and it can address these issues with creative precision. If we were simply using the more linear model of traditional theatre, we would not be able to insert these evolving ideas.

As a cabaret theatre artist I have fought to have my work taken seriously. But I've also fought to keep it in this non-conformist space, because it surprises the hell out of people when they come to a performance expecting to see tits and ass—which they do, in generous doses, sometimes in ways that alarm them—and they leave understanding that the criminalization of sex work leads to the abuse and death of thousands of women and men and transsexuals. All that for fifteen or twenty bucks. What a sweet deal.

DIY culture—of which cabaret is a central part—often comes across as strident and angry, and it is. I am angry. I am angry that sex workers continue to be criminalized for their work while others can profit from it, often employing outright lies and misrepresentations. But I also believe that we can change this by taking these depictions into our own hands and treating them with irreverence and reverence, contemplation and levity. This is a human rights issue and I want to lend my voice to the discussion from the stage. I'm tired of having my rights stalled because sex workers are only taken seriously when they tell stories of despair and abuse. I am tired of people who are afraid of sex telling me how all sexual expression should look.

Late last year we folded The Scandelles and began anew as Operation Snatch. We took this name from an operative implemented in the 1950s by the Canadian government against the Doukhobors. This community suffered the distress of having their children taken away and placed in residential schools because they refused to conform to "traditional" Canadian standards of education. The Doukhobors reacted to this injustice by protesting completely naked. When I came across photographs of this community standing in peaceful, bare-assed defiance (confronting, in their own way, the same moral climate as did burlesque dancers of the era), I was enthralled.

The power of protesting and performing naked shows strength and vulnerability. I really believe in this concept. We, too, put our bodies out on the line in support of our beliefs. I believe in showing my body to people no matter what state it is in because I believe that by rarifying nakedness, both metaphorically and physically, we are also rarifying our basic humanity. This is my body. I'll do what I want with it. And cabaret theatre is the venue in which I choose to express this.

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Whitehorse's
"Theatre of the Voice"

BY STEPHANIE LAMBERT

© Ruth Borgfjord / Hazel Venzone in *Embrace*
© Rick Massie Photography / Genevieve Doyon, Sam Bergmann-Good, Sarah Moore, Shaune McComb, Adele Gigantes, and Jessica Hickman in *Open Pit*
© Bruce Barrett / PJ Prudat in *Cafe Daughter*

I am interested in the interaction between theatre, morality, and voicelessness. Whitehorse is the home of what I refer to as "Theatre of the Voice," a theatre that addresses the issue of "what" and "who" have not been heard in the community. By using this specific type of socially engaged art, theatre makers in this Northern community have fostered what John C. Gibbs, a professor of developmental psychology, calls the "social perspective taking" that is necessary to "moral development and behaviour" (1). In this article, I will present the signs of such theatre produced by local companies in Whitehorse.[1]

I understand voicelessness in three ways: first, it is not finding or having the power to speak up/give your opinion; second, it is being a specific voice that is not represented in the public sphere; and third, it is not having the ability to make sounds or to use language. The third category is perhaps, by its nature, embedded in the first and second. Babies, for example, can't voice an opinion; and those who are mute are less likely to be represented in the public sphere, including the stage. But I suggest that these three tiers of voicelessness are amalgamated in what Whitehorse's Theatre of the Voice has been working towards addressing over the past thirty years, primarily through professional companies.

But what does such a theatre look like in practical terms?

Nakai Theatre's 2011 world premiere of *The River* (by Judith Rudakoff, David Skelton, and Joseph Tisiga) is an apt object of study in this regard. It presented twelve marginalized voices, portraying them as "shadow people moving on a ghost landscape"(68). Five actors performed the stories of such characters as Archie, a part First Nation, middle-aged man living on the street; Kirsten, a white youth; and Buzz, a twenty-seven-year-old First Nation "watcher": an observant, transient man of the community. Through a structure of episodic monologues and dialogues, these characters share what it feels like to be invisible in a a very demanding society. Archie must not expect respect or love; must not be sensitive toward or become attached to people, despite his needs; must not be gay or associate with gays; and must not like "Indians." Society demands that Kirsten must follow the fashion of technology, please others, and seek to be liked (at the expense of her opinions, her comfort, and her sexual health). Trapped in the consequences of their past and what has been expected of them, neither of these characters values their own thoughts, concerns, or feelings. As Kirsten concludes, "I want to ask where we're going, but I don't want to jinx this. Just shut up and walk, I tell myself" (13). With this

feeling of powerlessness, they wander in Whitehorse on a shifting landscape, shown through Buzz's observations as he talks of his displaced people:

> We started at Whiskey Flats, then we had to move, and now it's just a place for tourists.
>
> From Whiskey Flats we got moved to The Shipyards, and now there's a parking lot and a crap market.
>
> From The Shipyards to Sleepy Hollow then to the marsh and now up the hill.
>
> Different clans that hate each other, all living together.
>
> Fathers fucking daughters.
>
> Traces of our lives get left behind in each place. No one sees us when we are there. Why would they see us when we're gone. (27)

In *The River*, we are affected by the toughness of life and inspired by the vast natural environment. This is not a typical "Broadway"-type story. It expresses complex, local voices that have varying cultural perspectives; these voices are meaningful in a close political and cultural context.

This production is part of what I call Theatre of the Voice. It has sustained, quite remarkably, a consistent approach in engaging with "those we don't hear" through several dimensions. First, it engages through the ***script*** and its content, as we have briefly seen. The second dimension of engagement is ***collaboration***: *The River* was a statement of cultural diversity in itself, involving a team that included a First Nations director (Michael Greyeyes), a cast and crew of Anglo and Franco-Canadians and First Nations, and a Romanian-Canadian marketing director and producer. This type of theatre also engages voicelessness through the ***production***, which in the case of *The River* involved the risky act of putting what might be viewed as "difficult issues" on stage in a community with less than 28 000 inhabitants. The fourth and final dimension of engagement is the ***delivery***; one of the performances of *The River* was at the Salvation Army shelter. It offered the opportunity for dialogue with the very people the play was about, and perhaps also a confirmation of the self, which is so fundamental to individual and collective development (Parent 12). In a particularly powerful moment, in a scene where Archie had passed out on the floor, one audience member walked into the acting area and used his own coat to cushion Archie's head. Through this empathetic recognition, a bridge was built between fiction and reality, opening wide the doors for an interaction between theatre and real life moral behaviour.

Gibbs writes that "social perspective taking relates to the right and the good of morality, that is, to justice or mutual respect and empathy or caring" (1). Through the theatre's associative experiences, people can evolve in their personal understanding of the world and of others. The more aware people are of the "right" and the "good," the more we can hope to see right and good actions done, as we saw with the audience member at the Salvation Army shelter. If these positive actions can change a play's rehearsed course of action, then so can they change the world. In brief, we could describe such a theatre as seeking a quality of voice that showcases the margins, rather than the larger machine, of society .

Although Theatre of the Voice can be fun, it is not driven by an end goal of entertainment. Its practitioners often seem rather resentful of Theatre for Entertainment; this is something they will have to make peace with if they want to best serve the people of Whitehorse. The stakes of these two genres seem to be unequal, and the makers of Theatre of Voice may wonder: "Where are the true connections?" Because such art often goes against the current, those who practise it are confronted with a sense of isolation and financial burden: "If I do a difficult question-raising play or an experimental one in my small town, can an audience of a 100 people justify the expenses of the production? Or even 350 people? How will funders ever approve it? But then, if I don't ask the questions, who will? " These artists are plagued by doubts: fearing that their audiences will not relate to the tradition of theatre, or that they won't see it as a way to deal with local issues or to document their lives.

Theatre of the Voice can be hard-hitting, breaking down the fourth wall of theatre to collaborate with the community. It can seek healing, re-appropriation, confirmation (of the self or the collectivity), inclusion, denunciation, dialogue, rectification, recognition and truth. It can't, however, ask its audience to approbate its artistic sophistication. Nevertheless, through the awareness that beauty and innovation can allow us to approach a situation from different

© Richard Legner / Ayma Letang and Wayne Ward in *The River*

angles, this type of theatre creates "bridges" for the people of Whitehorse: engaging them in more dialogue, more social perspective taking, and perhaps challenging the status quo.

It is through persistence and sacrifices that such art has survived in Whitehorse. Against all odds, Celia McBride (co-artistic director of Sour Brides, with Moira Sauer) wrote *So Many Doors*, a play about the death of two children set in the North, co-produced it with Sauer in town (with Nakai Theatre), and toured it across Canada. Playwrights and co-artistic directors of Gwaandak Theatre, Leonard Linklater and Patti Flather, have for over thirteen years searched to portray "more Aboriginal stories and more stories from outside the mainstream; woman, people from the North, people from different cultures, different sexualities [and abilities]" (Linklater). They have produced and toured many shows[2]: One of these was their own co-written play, *Sixty Below* (co-produced with Nakai and the Society of Yukon Artists of Native Ancestry), which was based on the stories of Aboriginal people living on the street of Whitehorse battling addictions, making efforts to stay out of the justice system, and trying to reclaim some of their cultural identity. Another play they produced was *Café Daughter* by Kenneth T. Williams, the story of Chinese-Cree Yvette and her handling of ethnic shame in the 1950s and 1960s in rural Saskatchewan.

More recently, co-artistic producers Jessica Hickman and Sam Bergmann-Good have launched a new theatre company, Open Pit, through which they've produced (and acted in) the first step of their Devised Yukon Project. In *Nowhere Near* (2011), they used physical actions as much as words to present a play about six people surviving a bus crash "outside, in an isolated Territory" (Hickman). Through this production, Hickman, Bergmann-Good and four other creators and actors demanded to be free in style and searched to rectify a falsely conveyed image of the Yukon Gold Rush era projected by the tourist industry. These artists asked: Was Robert Service's poetry ever meant to be associated with can-can dancers? Was the Gold Rush a glamorous time?

Another example of this theatre was seen in Joseph Tisiga's one-man show *Grey Owl* at Nakai Theatre's Pivot Festival of 2009. In this play, he re-appropriated the persona of "Grey Owl," parodying famed Englishman Archie Belaney, who in the 1900s pretended to be Aboriginal and took the name "Grey Owl." Local designer Linda Leon described Tisiga's performance: "[Joseph] bought himself some cheap tanning solution from Shoppers to make himself browner only it turned out orange .... He bought air freshener because he wasn't actually allowed to smudge on stage ... so he was going around the performance space spraying air freshener .... It was pretty funny" (Leon).

Whitehorse's Theatre of the Voice doesn't always have to be expressed through new scripts. Arlin McFarlane and Eric Epstein, who co-directed the theatre company Separate Reality during the late 1980s, produced *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig. This show can be seen as an effort to change the prevailing social mindset: "There were letters in the papers about teachers being homosexual and how that would be bad for our youth ... [and] I thought that it was just important for people to see the humanity in people" (McFarlane). A similar goal was seen in the Guild's[3] community production of *The Laramie Project* (by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project) in 2010. Similarly, the Yukon Educational Theatre's original mandate of "public Legal education contracts" can be also considered as representing Theatre of the Voice. Since the late 1970s, the company has produced and toured plays about "alcohol awareness, mock courts to train community JPs, [and] sex education " (Dray).

In spite of this presence, it seems as though Theatre of the Voice is battling to survive. One might wonder why this is. Why is it that the community theatres in Whitehorse mainly produce mainstream plays from the "canon"? After being posed this question, Celia McBride replied: "Perhaps when one comes from a smaller community one is more likely to feel that his or her voice is not important. Perhaps there aren't enough encouraging mentors. I think this is changing now. Nakai is being proactive in developing local voices."

Has voicelessness in the community supported voicelessness on stage? Are people afraid to confront themselves? Do they just not care? Why is it easier to draw the public to shows focused on entertainment than those making difficult inquiries? Is it because life is hard enough in the first place that one doesn't want to experience the suffering of others? Or has hope been lost? Is theatre accessible enough? Is it inviting?

In the face of all these questions, one must remember that many people in the general public have not been exposed to theatre enough or to a "contemporary aesthetic." Theatre of Voice can only persist in inviting people, and aim to avoid resenting those who don't "get" meaningful theatre making. Fortunately for the Whitehorse population, Nakai has been reaching out to local voices. Since 1979, it has developed and produced unheard voices, staging, among others, plays "dealing with contact between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people and traditions" (D'Aeth 1). The company encouraged the creation of new works at the 24 Playwriting Competition (such as *Sixty Below*). Some of these works surfaced at Nakai's bi-annual Homegrown Theatre Festival: a hugely important forum for developing local voices over the past ten years. Some of have also been featured at the Nakai's annual Pivot Theatre Festival, which presents a selection of bold plays from local, national, and international artists such as the aforementioned *Grey Owl* by Tisiga; American performance artist Taylor Mac's *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*, in which he used drag to "describe the culture of fear in the United States created by George W. Bush" (Skelton); and Vancouver artist Hazel Venzone's *Embrace*, a "big cooking show" with the Filipino community and particularly relevant to cultural diversity, morality, and voicelessness.

Venzone, while building her thirty minute Verbatim piece (trying to understand her relationship with her mother, a first generation Filipino in Winnipeg), discovered that the Filipino community did not have a voice on stage: "Nothing had ever, ever been shown about the Filipino community there so they felt a huge sense of honour and have invited me back. I gained a big, big amount of their trust which I didn't anticipate ... Not because I didn't respect them or the piece but I just didn't know that that sense of trust would come shortly after" (Personal interview). She went back for Pivot 2012 because she thought, "Everyone deserves a voice." She gave a two-week long workshop on "How to reveal yourself" to ten Filipino cooks. They then told their stories of integration on stage. When asked why she chose food as a theme, she responded that it was the method that made her interviewees feel most comfortable. We can see that *Embrace* reflects the same criteria of

Theatre of the Voice as seen previously with regard to *The River*, although with some variants:

It engaged through the ***script***, which showcases narratives of local Filipino cooks never before heard on stage. It used ***collaboration***: the performers and director were Filipinos, and Nakai's team, hosting the festival, was composed of Anglo-Canadians and Romanian-Canadians. The three performances were constructed with on-stage participation of the audience that was divided as follows: Filipino community (30%), theatre patrons (45%), and new audience / Yukon residents (25%) (Venzone "re: photos"). The dimension of ***production*** was seen in *Embrace*'s risky act of staging what might be viewed as "culturally specific" and "experimental" in a town of less than 28 000 inhabitants with an estimated community of 2000 Filipinos. *Embrace* also engaged through the ***delivery***: the performance was set at the Yukon Inn Fireside Room, a location that desacralized theatre. Audience members were invited to participate actively in the formation of the event: they could sign-up to have a culinary lesson on stage with the chefs or to sing Karaoke as part of the production. Projections ensured the general audience would hear stories (of integration) shared, while Venzone "kept the ball in the air" with a microphone.

We could further add another dimension of engagement to this event: ***active involvement with the community***. Although Theatre of the Voice has mainly been brought forth by professional theatres, on a few occasions professional artists are actively hands on *with* the community to create new works. In this approach, artists don't put the stories of common people on stage; they go on stage with the people and their stories. Because the "performing community member" is integrated with the "viewing community member," these events when well executed carry with them a shared happiness for the audience, which is now "part of the gang" rather than "being told so by the other gang." Therefore, a heightened sense of equality is installed in the artistic dialogue; it is from the "levelled inclusiveness" of this experience that the active involvement with the community draws its power. It is about a desire to feel "in" something and accepted for who you are. It is also about wanting to learn. Perhaps the reason *Embrace* received such positive feedback in the artist's survey of the event was because it responded best to these needs and desires: "There should be more community events that include everyone—this show was a perfect example"; "The stories from the cooks opened my eyes"; and "This event helped me build relationships with new people."

Another example of such collaborative endeavours between professionals artists and the community is Gwaandak Theatre's *Tell Me More...* (2009), which Patti Flather created in collaboration with the Ynklude troupe (a group formed in 2005 with the aim of including people with and without disabilities on stage). The devised show was built using the creative input of all performers, forming a story of transformation with songs and physical actions. Director Brian Fidler stated, "If Patti wasn't putting together those shows or bringing that group together along with other people, they wouldn't be on the stage." Again, here we see signs of a kind of teaching born out of a need for particular groups to be heard and confirmed as part of the community. Although this is not the only way for Theatre of the Voice to exist, it is probably its most gentle rendition—and some respond best to gentleness.

All of these productions mentioned above are clearly the results of artists wanting to see "right" and "good" exist in their society. They have asked people, year after year, to find the power to speak up, and they have provided examples of how to do it. They have striven to represent greater diversity and more stories, to increase the level of empathy in their society, and thus they incite action. Theatre is accountable for its moral choices and its moral repercussions: from the selection of a script or voice to how it is produced, by whom, and why. Theatre of the Voice thus understands that theatre making should be approached with a great sense of responsibility.

NOTES

1. Although the Yukon Arts Centre has had a major cultural impact in Whitehorse since the 1990s by fostering a space for touring shows and bringing new and unconventional work by nationally recognized companies, I've restricted the focus of this article to local theatre companies.
2. They mainly toured in the Yukon, but also in the NWT.
3. The Guild is a community theatre founded in 1980. It was voted "favorite theatre company in the Yukon" in a *North of Ordinary* magazine survey in 2012.

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Theatre as Cultural Agency: The Case of the Women's Theatre Centre in Warsaw, Poland

BY JEANNINE PITAS

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It was difficult, painful work. I learned many things about myself, about my family, about the reasons behind some of my past failings. But the most important thing I learned was what my strengths were: I learned how to build a future and good, healthy relationships with others.

Work on the production lasted a long time—nine months. At last the night of the "birth" (the premiere) arrived. I had a wooden board as a prop, a sign of my strength and determination. The show began. We were performing on the stage of the Wytwornia Theatre, and the seven other performers and I came out dressed entirely in black. I remember as if through a fog—That's how scared I was. I knew that the most important person in my life was sitting in the audience and watching me: my daughter. It was for her that I especially wanted to show these scenes from my own life—so that she might better understand me and forgive me for the mistakes that I made while raising her. I played my part in a trance, right up to the final blackout. But then when we went to take our bows—What a shock! We got a standing ovation. Some people were crying. There was applause, flowers, congratulations on all sides. One person hugged me, another asked when the next performance would be. Our feet were trembling as we left the stage, but we were happy. It had been worthwhile.

Three days later we performed again, and this was an even bigger success. I don't know how people found out about us, but I guess they knew that something important was going on. A hall meant for 150 people was filled with at least 200; there weren't enough chairs, and many audience members had to sit on the floor. After the performance once again there was a standing ovation, tears, congratulations, thanks, and flowers. It was amazing. Our play had touched on important social issues; we decided that we needed to keep on performing. We hoped to help other women through the same medium that had helped us.

Afterwards, fragments of our show were shown on television. The issue of violence against women finally stopped being taboo in the media. Thanks to this program, many women have found out where they can go for help. ("Historia J.C" 19-20)[1]

This is a fragment from a true story of a woman who gives her name only as Jola. When her relationship turned abusive and her grown daughter moved away to London, she found herself alone and jobless in Warsaw, Poland. She turned to the Women's Rights Centre—an NGO that offers support for domestic violence survivors—and thus began her life-changing involvement in theatre. Jola is one of many women who have benefited from the Kobiecy Ośrodek Teatralny (Women's Theatre Centre) founded in 2007 by psychotherapist and writer Dagna Ślepowronska.

After the women's stories emerge through group therapy sessions, Ślepowronska transforms them into a play, allowing the participants to express their life narratives in a symbolic, more universalized form. For Ślepowronska, the strength of the theatre is its essential nature as performance. By performing an active role on stage, women acquire the resources needed to perform such active roles in other aspects of their lives.

The symbolic rite of passage, a central component of all of Ślepowronska's works, serves as a metaphor for the change that these women are undergoing in their everyday lives. "Our goal when we started was to help these women to see themselves not as 'victims of violence' but as "free individuals deciding their own fate," explains Ślepowronska in her article entitled "Ritual Theatre as Psychological Therapy and Social Intervention" (9). She notes that upon beginning the project, most of these women experience chronic fear, guilt, a sense of worthlessness, an inability to set boundaries, and a lack of contact with their own feelings and their bodies. The objective of the project is to help women change some of these attitudes and undergo a rite of passage from one life stage to another. Since 2007, Ślepowronska has written and directed five ritualistic theatre productions: *Pasja* (Passion), *Strachy* (Terrors), *Ballada o słodkiej Dafne* (The Ballad of Sweet Daphne), *Magiczne varietes czyli Annuszka znów rozlała olej* (Magical Varieties, or Annuszka spilled the oil again) and *Feeder*.

Removing the Victim's Mask: *Passion*

In the first phase of the development of the Women's Theatre Centre, Ślepowronska worked with eleven women ranging in age from thirty-seven to fifty-six, all of whom had experienced various forms of physical, psychological, and economic violence. Some of them had moved out on their own; others were still living in abusive conditions because they were unable to seek a divorce. In one case, the woman's husband had abused her for a period of time but then had stopped doing so; she had entered the program as a preventative measure in order to prepare herself to confront the situation should it ever happen again. "All of these women had tendencies to return to abusive situations, and all of them had experienced some form of violence in the past, often in their childhood homes," Ślepowronska explains ("Ritual Theatre" 9). Moreover, all of them had participated in group therapy and had taken vocational courses in preparation to seek employment.

When they came to the first workshop, Ślepowronska led a basic acting class that focused on creating a role and practising various physical exercises. The main effect of this group work was to lead the participants to see their problems not as individual failings, but as having a wider effect on their entire families. This led the participants to recognize that their feelings of guilt were a factor in their inability to see domestic abuse for what it was. It also led to an enhanced level of self-respect and, most importantly, the ability to recognize "victimization" as a temporary state from which these women might emerge and enter a new life stage. This meeting was followed by a three-month break in which the participants underwent a three-step plan toward improving their lives. The fourth step was to return to the theatre group for further work ("Ritual Theatre" 9).

Once they returned, Ślepowronska led the participants in weekly three-hour workshops with the psychological goal to help them to free themselves from their former role as victim and the social goal to produce a high quality work of art that might be performed in front of an audience. Ślepowronska's main aim was to produce a piece that would have a ritualistic, ceremonial quality: a symbolic, public expression of the change the women were undergoing. As she explains,

> There are many approaches to therapeutic theatre. At times creative expression is treated as worthy in its own right; often performances done by people suffering from mental illnesses take on this form. Another approach is to focus

> on storytelling, on the actors' recounting of their own lives. This is often used in the German BUS method, where actors stand up and tell their own life stories. The element of distance needed for therapeutic transformation is achieved by changing the actors' stories so that Person A tells Person B's story, B tells C's, etc. However, our goal was not merely to tell stories but to demonstrate the changes that the workshop participants had undergone through the therapeutic process. It also meant establishing a real threshold which these women could cross, a clear borderline dividing the former life as a victim from the current life led according to new standards. The idea was that a theatrical performance must not only imitate, but embody a rite of passage. It was in this way that *Passion* came into being. ("Ritual Theatre" 10)

Combining ritual with art, *Passion* takes the form of three stages: separation, threshold and integration. In the first part, the victim stage, each woman represents a different member of the group. "The idea was to give the women a chance to distance themselves from their former lives and view them from the outside" (11). This stage is embodied through the masks that the participants themselves created during the workshop. These masks represent the learned patterns of victimization and traditional gender roles stretching back to earliest childhood. Ślepowronska notes that this first stage was not portrayed in a completely negative light. "Being a victim is not entirely bad," she says. "It is simply a very difficult and painful means of survival."

During the second stage, the threshold stage, the women switch from acting out their fellow participants' stories to playing themselves. This stage seeks to represent the moment that the women become aware of the need to advance to a new life stage but are not yet completely ready to do so. "Before our actors are able to remove the victims' masks—both onstage and in life—they must undergo a fight against shadows. These are the curses that have been imposed upon them since childhood […] In this show, the therapists played these shadows; we did not allow the participants to remove the masks until they revealed a degree of strength against which we ourselves were helpless" ("Ritual Theatre" 12).

FOR ŚLEPOWRONSKA, THE STRENGTH OF THE THEATRE IS ITS ESSENTIAL NATURE AS PERFORMANCE. BY PERFORMING AN ACTIVE ROLE ON STAGE, WOMEN ACQUIRE THE RESOURCES NEEDED TO PERFORM SUCH ACTIVE ROLES IN OTHER ASPECTS OF THEIR LIVES.

The participants then enter the third stage, integration, in which each one is offered a choice: "Before you lie a blessing and a curse—Choose." At this point, each participant continues to be pursued by the black-clad shadows that seek to keep them from choosing. The drama culminates as each participant declares, "I choose life," and removes the mask of victimization.

The significance of this highly ritualistic play lies in its dramatization of the process that each of these survivors must undergo on the path to recovery. "This method gives them a chance. It makes their stories specific. In therapy we don't delve into the depths of these women's entire past lives, nor do we want to make them relive these terrible experiences again and again," explains Ślepowronska. "The magic of theatre is that it works in metaphors; instead of focusing on the past, we focus on what we can do now—singing, acting, working, living. We just want to help these women to feel like human beings again […] Some of them at the beginning of the program spoke so quietly that you couldn't even hear them. Our goal here is for their voices to be heard" (Personal interview).

And, as Jola's and other former participants' testimonies reveal, the opportunity to transform these difficult life experiences into a work of art is indeed helping to empower these women on all different levels. According to the article, during the process of this project, all of the women showed improvements in their professional and family lives. Two women who had been unemployed at the start of the workshop managed to find work; another decided to change careers in order to seek better opportunities. All of them showed themselves to be more assertive, aware of themselves and others, and concerned with their own interests. Additionally, one participant left her husband and married again. After three weeks in this new marriage she realized she had, once again, entered a violent relationship—an awareness that, during her first marriage, had taken her fifteen years to attain ("Ritual Theatre" 12).

All in all, the women expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the performance, and some of them decided to continue with the group by participating in another performance the following year (Ślepowronska, Personal interview). As for the social effects, viewers of the show found that it did an excellent job of revealing the universality of violence. "This piece was effective not only for women, but for men in the audience was well," asserts Ślepowronska. "Many people turned their attention to issues of family violence. The media reacted. In fact, after this performance, four different TV broadcasts were devoted specifically to discussing issues of family violence. I will use this as evidence to support my claim that our attempt at raising people's awareness of this issue passed its test" ("Ritual Theatre" 12).

Reaching Wider Audiences: *The Ballad of Sweet Daphne*

The initial success of *Passion* was followed by a second production, *Terrors*. After this, actors from both productions—along with some newcomers to the programme—began working with Ślepowronska on a third project. "This time around we decided to focus not just on the issue of violence directly, but also on deeper, more existential problems—death, the loss of one's first love, and the experience of femininity in general," explains Ślepowronska. "We also discussed our dreams. As our discussions progressed, however, I soon learned that every single one of the women in our group had experienced some form of sexual abuse. It was from these conversations that *The Ballad of Sweet Daphne* came to life" (Personal interview).

While less ritualistic and more plot-driven than *Passion*, this reinterpretation of the classical story of Daphne also

makes use of myth. However, here it is not Apollo who pursues Daphne but an anonymous satyr in the forest, and it is not the river god who rescues her but a cat. This play also makes use of masks, but the title character is represented as a marionette whose movement is manipulated by the black-clad actor behind her. The largest conflict of the play occurs when Daphne, after being raped by the satyr, returns home to her mother and attempts to tell her what has happened, only to be faced by her mother's disapproval and blame. "Unfortunately, this attitude toward rape is still very much ingrained in Polish society," Ślepowronska comments. "Whenever a woman is raped, the police tend to treat her story with suspicion, and the first question that anyone asks is, 'How was she dressed?'" (Personal interview).

The play then narrates Daphne's experiences as she matures; she is timid and permanently wounded by the experience of being raped and then forced to bear the blame for her own suffering. We see that she chooses abusive relationships and cannot break free from the past. Even though this play departs from the original myth in that there is no specific instance of Daphne turning into a tree, it is clear that her experience has condemned her to a passive, plant-like existence.

The play culminates in a trial scene in which the actor holding the marionette calls upon the other characters to prove their innocence in this case. One by one, beginning with the satyr himself, each character justifies his or her actions and denies any responsibility for having done Daphne wrong. Executioners surround her, bearing witness to her guilt. At the end, even the actor holding Daphne is about to condemn her for having committed a great wrong. But, an appearance from the cat leads this actor—who, we realize now, represents the adult Daphne—to forgive the child of all previous offences and to take care of her. Ślepowronska explains:

> This is a representation of the situation that many people face in the aftermath of a rape. The adult who has supposedly overcome this trauma ends up hating the child, just as the adult actor portrayed on stage ends up hating the puppet in her hands. Thus, it becomes clear that even though years have gone by, the adult has not really overcome the violence that was done to her. She can only do so when she resolves not to blame or despise the child who was wronged, but to love and care for her. (Personal interview)

Like *Passion*, this play was well received by its audiences. "After it was over, many people approached us and told us some of their own stories, including some men who were raped in childhood. We must remember that this is not only a women's problem—it's a universal problem. People face so many different kinds of violence everyday" (Personal interview). Ślepowronska adds that the women were able to perform this play in front of the police. As already mentioned, police attitudes toward violence against women continue to be ambivalent, and thankfully this play has served as an educational tool.

In December 2009, the group travelled to Brussels to perform the play before the European Parliament as part of a public hearing toward an EU directive on violence against women. Although the play was performed in Polish, audience members were given an English translation of the text and encouraged to follow along. "Unfortunately, our laws still treat domestic violence like too much of a personal issue," Ślepowronska states (Personal interview). The play was received warmly and followed by a discussion. While there is still a long way to go in the process, this public hearing can be viewed as a significant first step toward improving legislation across Europe aimed at fighting all forms of violence against women.

Following upon the public success of this production, the Women's Theatre Centre went on to produce two more shows and, despite recent government budget cuts, is now in the midst of preparing its sixth production.

Conclusion

The idea of theatre and other performing arts as cultural agency for effecting social change is not new. Perhaps one of the most noteworthy examples of this kind of initiative is the Brazilian Theatre of the Oppressed, whose interactive Forum Theatre calls upon audience members to solve the problems being presented onstage and has been employed in many different contexts as a way of recognizing oppression and searching for alternative solutions to problems. Developed in the 1960s under the leadership of Augusto Boal, this form of theatre has spread to many parts of the world. Meanwhile, artists such as Ariane Mnouchkine, who has formed a theatre company in Afghanistan, and Ivaldo Bertazzo, who has engaged teenagers from São Paulo's favelas in professional dance productions, reveal the amazing potential of the arts to empower individuals and communities.

While the Women's Theatre Centre is smaller in scope than efforts such as Bertazzo's or Mnouchkine's, it is nevertheless effecting change. The fortunate women who have found their way to this project have emerged with a new sense of meaning in their lives, with the awareness that they are individuals with the capacity to make choices and take responsibility for their own destinies. And with each public performance, these women are working to make more people aware of the ongoing problems caused by gender inequality—problems that are universal and require constant care and attention. The example of the Women's Theatre Centre's theatre of ritual and rite of passage might hopefully serve as an example for other NGOs working to address social injustice and improve human security—those that address not only gender, but violence in all its forms. The advantage of Ślepowronska's approach is that it manages to act as a therapeutic method for the participants while also reaching out and moving audiences in unexpected ways. It will be exciting to observe how the Women's Theatre Centre project continues to develop over the coming years, and it will be even more exciting when more NGOs in Poland and elsewhere recognize the potential of theatre and other forms of cultural agency to work for necessary social change.

NOTE

1 All the plays, articles, and interviews quoted in this article were originally in Polish and translated into English by the author.

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A Love Song for March 22, 2012

We were 200,000-300,000 people in the streets of Montreal.

We obliterated crowd size estimations. We stretched more than fifty city blocks. We were in the downtown, the Plateau, and the Old Port simultaneously. Our passion could not be contained by the blinking of streetlights, by the confines of this cement and asphalt playground, or by the narrowness of the minds that claim to represent us.

On that day the headlines read, "Massive Student Tuition March Paralyzes Montreal." People are saying that the city ground to a halt as we stood together in protest of the Quebec government's plan to further privatize university funding and increase tuition.

But on Thursday, March 22, I did not feel immobile.

In fact, to those who say the city ground to a halt, I could not disagree more.

We were not halted, *mes amis*. A city is only paralyzed when we have atrophied in our understanding of the unboundedness of movement—for we were moving, but moving in a different way, in an electric state that some of us have never felt before. My friends, on Thursday, we were dancing!

Dancing to a very different tune. A tune unfamiliar to the type of capitalism that believes civil society and democracy must play second fiddle to profit. We were singing a melody that will never be up for copyright, with instruments that cannot be patented. As far as I know, a 200,000-part harmony has not yet been commodified.

I was renewed and completely inspired by the commitment, the creativity, and the energy that engulfed the city. I don't know if I believe anymore those who tell me that now is not a good time for revolution. For as Paulo Freire has said, "I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love."

And as hundreds of thousands of feet danced across Sherbrooke, I felt the scale of an act of love I had never known before, and it grew and grew and multiplied upon itself. Teachers, parents, grandparents cheered from the sidewalks, from balconies, from the rooftops. Protesters beckoned with their arms, a flock of swans' necks, urging onlookers to flood the streets.

Friends found each other among the massive crowd for embrace after embrace. At one corner on Sherbrooke, toddlers and their caretakers carefully brush-stroked a third story daycare window red, as thousands upon thousands marched below, waving up to them: "This is for you!" we cried. "This is for you!"

Is this not love?
Is this what the police and our government are condemning as brutality?
As violence?

What about the sound of grenades? What about the pepper spray? The batons, the plastic shields? What about economic violence? What about the violence of homelessness, the violence of capital? What about the violence of our prison system, what about the violence of bill C-31—violence against immigrants and refugees? What about the violence that Charest intends to impose on northern Quebec? The violence of continued colonialism, the violence against Indigenous communities who face the destruction of their traditional lands? What about the violence of not listening?

We know about violence, Madame Beauchamp. Merci. *Nous savons ce qu'est la violence, Monsieur Charest. Merci.*

What about your institutional violence? The violence of your false rhetoric of "Fairness" and "Balance" has not gone uncontested. We can see that increases in tuition will disproportionately affect people marginalized on the basis of race, gender, ability, as well as class.

There is really only one reasonable way to change all this, which is to know that at this moment, "la hausse" is breathing down our necks. But swatting at the air behind our heads is temporary relief. Next year it will be something else. In fact, next month there will be something else. Tomorrow there will be something else. In this hour, there are surely also a hundred something elses.

So, we must be prepared to continue. The fight against empire and the growth of our comprehension of and distaste for violence and oppression must become as daily an act as brushing our teeth. As kissing our children.

We must keep dancing, and the drumbeat will steadily quicken with our footsteps. And the structures of empire will weaken. In the words of Arundhati Roy, we will triumph through "our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness—and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe."

Jess Glavina

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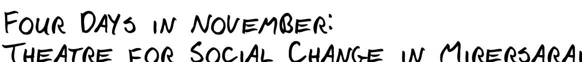
DISPATCH



In July 2011, a truck packed with eighty school children on the way home from a victorious football match rolled into a canal near the Chittagong port in Mirersarai, Bangladesh. Forty-seven young members of the community died and at least ten more were severely injured. One schoolteacher and the driver were killed.

When I visited Mirersarai four months later, many of the most directly affected individuals were still not able to work and several of the survivors had not returned to school. But during my visit, I was able to observe the conclusion of a workshop hosted by the school organized by the Bangladesh Therapeutic Theatre Institute, a wing of Unite Theatre for Social Action (UTSA)—a workshop that marked the first attempt of any kind to collectively address the accident and its impact on the community.

Every year, the Therapeutic Theatre Institute organizes a National Workshop, inviting partners in effort from abroad to collaborate. Back at the beginning of July, upon learning about the accident, an executive director of UTSA, Mostafa Kamal Jatra, had contacted government representatives in Mirersarai. It was too soon. Finally at the end of August, community leaders in Mirersarai agreed to host visitors from UTSA.

When the teachers and parents in Mirersarai gave Jatra the green light, he contacted Mark Wentworth and Felipe de Mora, the founding members of Dynamic Theatre. This company employs the "action method" of spontaneous representation inspired by the shamanic use of theatre, drama and storytelling, moving between Lisbon and London to create workshops for groups interested in using theatre as a form of healing or for social change. Three months later, Wentworth and de Mora were in Mirersarai, working alongside Jatra's team from UTSA and a group of six theatre graduate students studying at the Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka.

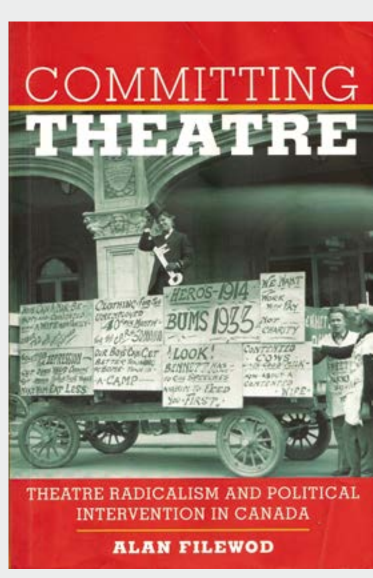
Before beginning the workshop, which consisted of four full days and was held entirely at the local school, Wentworth, de Mora, and Jatra trained the students to lead the activities with the various groups, equipping them with vocabulary and exercises and discussing their objectives. According to Wentworth, the aims were to create a space in which the community could share feelings and emotions, to bring hope, and to report on what the people of Mirersarai needed during this critical recovery period.

Over the course of four days, the theatre students facilitated sessions on storytelling, expressive movement, compositions or "tableaus," and drawing. They often ended up listening to the students and their families speak for hours. Many of the parents who had lost children in the accident met for the first time during the sessions. The final days of the workshop included playful, basic theatre games; a drawing competition; two sets of dialogues between the teachers, members of the Therapeutic Theatre Institute, Dynamic Theatre, and donors; and a lunch hosted by a family who had lost their eldest son. On the last day, the facilitators' main focus with the children was on hopeful images. With the teachers, the aim was to bring the talks closer to a plan for continuous support in the future.

Although strenuous, these dialogues were incredible to witness: the teachers had felt their job was to pretend as though nothing had happened in order to keep the students in school. When the session leaders suggested that they too might be suffering, expressions of relief, shock, and gratitude passed through the staff. While there was some resistance to opening this very difficult door, most seemed to see the need for dialogue and to trust that others would continue to be there to lean on.

Although I missed much of the workshop, I can comment on the immediate and effective response of a local theatre community to meet the needs of an entire village that had been suffering deeply. I wish to share the efforts of these artist activists to encourage open communication in a safe space, to bring families and teachers together, and to introduce performance as a means of expression and self-exploration with those dedicated to working towards the same ends.

Anna Roth Trowbridge



Book review

BY AIDA JORDÃO

Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada

BY ALAN FILEWOD

TORONTO: BETWEEN THE LINES, 2011. Pp. ix & 364.

Alan Filewod's *Committing Theatre: Theatre Radicalism and Political Intervention in Canada* is a unique addition to the existing literature on Canadian theatre. It is a theatre history that documents and validates non-mainstream, non-canonized theatre and theatrical acts of a radical nature. Consequently, it pushes heretofore marginalized performance onto centre stage and persuades us to accept it as theatre history. From the outset, with Filewod's description of a man making a political intervention in a municipal office with a bouquet covered in ravenous, crop-threatening caterpillars, we understand that this book will describe stagings and name names many of us have not heard of before. In a field where most plays and performances "[leave] few traces" and research results in "a history of the forgotten and unremarked, traced through the survival of the exceptional (2)," Filewod defies tradition to recover and discuss performance that is "illegitimate," or, as summarized in the last lines of the book, theatre "in which the rules break down, propriety dissolves, a woman performs her breasts, transgression compels spectatorship, performance refuses disciplinarity, a man bows and presents caterpillars. That is the point of refusal and the beginning of activist performance" (314).

This is the overt intention of Filewod's activist theatre history, and, for the most part, his chosen case studies verify the claim to a transgressive and progressive continuum of Canadian performance since the nineteenth century. But Filewod also argues that interventionist theatre "can express any ideological value" (17) and therefore includes analyses of "right-wing agitprop" (302) and "activist theatre from the right" (304). These are, of course, deconstructed with Filewod's unwavering progressive ideology, but they may send some readers, for whom a radical or interventionist politic does not include the combination of the words "agitprop" and "activism" with "right-wing," into a near apoplexy.

This would be my case. As it will affect the direction of this review, in the interest of full disclosure, I overtly name myself and my position vis-à-vis activist theatre in Canada. I am squarely in the picture as a red diaper baby and featured in Chapter 8, "Powering Structures and Popular Theatre," as an actor and playwright with the Company of Sirens, Straight Stitching, and Ground Zero Productions. I had a substantial role in the movement and continue to direct the occasional Boal-inspired Forum theatre play and other community arts projects.

Filewod and I worked tirelessly for two years on the steering committee of the 1989 Bread and Butter popular theatre festival (where we sided together in a heated ideological split not unlike some described in *Committing Theatre*). In other words, I have "committed" theatre and in the same circles as the author of this book.

More importantly, I consider that this history of Canadian theatre, unlike any other, situates my work on a radical theatre timeline with a continuity granted to me for the first time; it was therefore admittedly irritating to read about conservative, at times pseudo-fascist, rituals in lengthy and detailed sections. Here, Filewod ventures into areas that are not his "fields of participation" (vii), and though they are rigorously researched and written in his compelling brisk and lucid style, they disrupt the rich, complex, and candid accounts of what I see as truly radical (as in revolutionary or left-wing) performance. For how can historical reenactments that are clearly regressive be considered of the same ilk as progressive activism? How can military commemorations, or "[m]asculinist hero-combat plays" (304)—even as they are subjected to a progressive deconstruction—share the stage (or Chapter 9 in this case) with Ground Zero/Banner Theatre labour-focused collaborations and *Sinking Neptune*, a de-professionalized and de-aestheticized performance by an anarchist collective that parodies and critiques the Euro-centric thrust of the alleged founding play of Canadian theatre *Le Théâtre de Neptune en la Nouvelle-France* (285-309)? Even though Filewod notes that Bertolt Brecht, in his *Lehrstückes*, demonstrated that "agitprop is not an ideologically determined form" (326, n.9), I believe that those who use it for reactionary indoctrination are co-opting it. Some of the conservative case studies examined here do create formal bridges to posterior activist theatre work, but they do not fulfill at least one of Filewod's principles for a theatre of intervention, namely that "radical theatre reflects the continuity of local practices aimed towards *the generation rather than the display of power*" (my italics, 18), or the call for a "tradition of radical refusal," including that of masculinist models (19).

In view of this apparent paradox in the written text, I conducted an alternative reading by turning to the very few, but undoubtedly carefully chosen, photographs and illustrations in *Committing Theatre*. The front and back covers clearly demonstrate the book's pluralistic approach to the cultural field of theatre and its left-wing prerogative. On the front is a photo of a Depression-era agitprop in which a politician wearing a top-hat, bow-tie and smarmy smile and carrying a large prop key (to the city) stands on a flatbed truck on a city street with placards that read, "Hero's [sic] 1914 Bums 1933,""How can a man be happy and contented with a wife and family underfed and underclothed?" and "Look! Bennett has come to give speeches. Ask him to feed you first!" The actor impersonating Bennett contrasts sharply with the men bedecked in flour-sacks standing by the truck. This is agitprop at its bluntest. And it is a direct ancestor to our Company of Sirens or Ground Zero 1980s satiric sketches in which Mike Harris, attired in fine duds and smirking, surveyed the audience over a group of actors dressed as workers on a picket line. One of our struggles was against the Free Trade agreement, which forced factory closures in Ontario and caused the devastation of families much as the Depression of the 1930s did.

When I first saw *Committing Theatre*, I recognized the players, the message, and the form of theatre immediately. A similar photo, though in a treed area, introduces Chapter 3, "Mobilized Theatre and the Invention of Agitprop," although both are only discussed in Chapter 4 (98). On turning the book over, I was met with nothing less than the only surviving photo of the only full production of *Eight Men Speak*, the 1933 Workers' Theatre play about the alleged assassination attempt of Communist leader Tim Buck while he and seven other comrades were held for "unlawful association" in Kingston penitentiary. This photo of *Eight Men Speak* is repeated as the introductory image to Chapter 4, "Six Comrades and a Suitcase, from Agitprop to 'Eight Men Speak,'" though its smaller format here makes it difficult to glean the details described in the last section of the chapter. In contrast to the front cover, this photo shows a more conventional theatrical situation in that the aesthetic space, raised and with the performers arranged so as to be seen from the front only, is separated from the spectatorial area. Both cover photos are from 1933, and although Filewod challenges the widely accepted notion of a Canadian 1930s "workers theatre movement"—he argues that it is more of a "regulatory practice" than a movement (110)—the privileged position of the images reinforces the importance of this theatre practice for later incarnations of the radical in Canadian theatre. Ironically, because of their symmetrical framing of the content of the book, the photos also suggest a suppression of radical theatre practice that preceded or followed the thirties, though this is not corroborated in the text. In fact, these two photos support Filewod's engagement with a broad definition of theatre that is further stressed with the images chosen for Chapter 1 (a man in drag in the 1908 Guelph Old Boys Parade), Chapter 2 (a J. W. Bengough chalk-talk performance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century), Chapter 7 (the Mummers outdoor Punch and Judy version of Newfoundland's colonial history), and Chapter 9 (a photo of the *Sinking Neptune* "protest" mentioned above).

Pageantry, political drama published in newspapers, burlesque, mock parliaments, rituals of fraternal societies, notorious "box-house" theatres, and the platform performance category that includes chalk-talks share the delightful (if not strictly progressive) Chapter 2, "Class, Spectatorship, and the Unruly: the Nineteenth Century," and prepare us for the medley of performative intervention in the twenty-first century discussed in the final chapter, "Out There: Digital Streets, Chaos Aesthetics, Heritage Guerillas." In both of these chapters, Filewod explores the phenomenon of "spectating performers" (49), who frequently challenge the author as authority discourse, and simultaneously provides textual examples that interweave with his scholarly voice. This variety of expressions is entertaining—the script excerpts are veritable treasures from the print era—and upholds the value of multi-authored work, a regular practice of collective theatre throughout the twentieth century. Chapter 2 also introduces mumming as "unruly public disorder" (59) and connects it to the Newfoundland Mummers Troupe, a case study in a most unruly form of theatre administration.

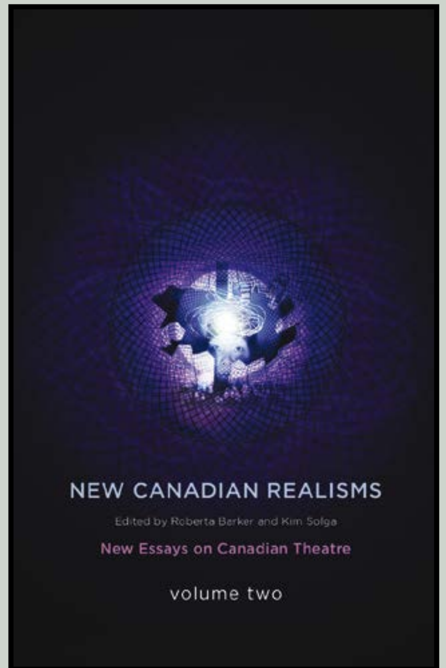
In "A Case of Cultural Sabotage: The Mummers Troupe," Filewod draws on company and arts council documents, memoirs, and interviews to painstakingly trace the rise and decline of this rebellious group of artists first led by Chris Brookes. The 1973 photo of the Mummers shows a scaffold cum puppet theatre draped in the Union Jack with long-haired, barefoot actors in bell-bottoms (hippies!) playing instruments and operating puppets, one holding a sign that reads "Utrecht." The children's Punch and Judy show is subverted to

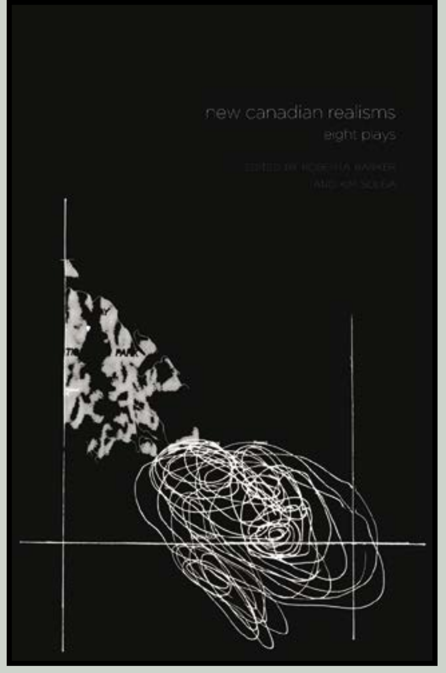
enable a sophisticated conversation about colonialism. These are the heady early days of the Mummers, when a radical creation and administration model seemed possible. But, like the story of Oscar and Toby Ryan and their leadership of the Workers' Theatre or George Luscombe's revolutionary Toronto Workshop Productions, this exposé of the Mummers' inability to reconcile ideological imperatives with financial survival is heartrending.

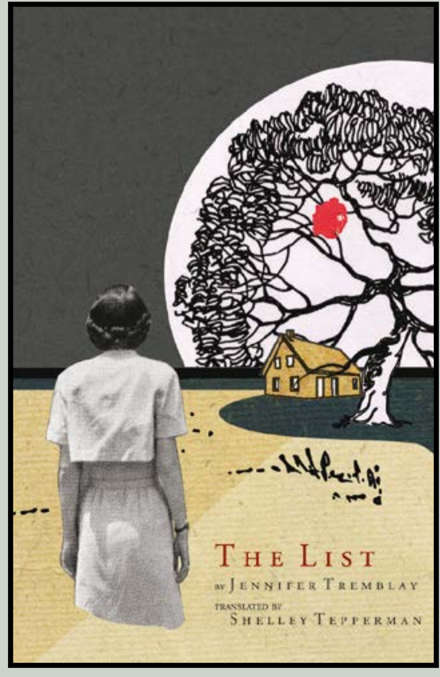
The remaining three photos allude to plays in the more conventional sense (which is not to say that the Mummers' *Newfoundland Night* or Optative Theatrical Laboratories' *Sinking Neptune* photos are not of plays, but I suggest they may be categorized as alternative forms of performance). The most intriguing is that of Chapter 5, "Crafting Theatre Work: Mid-Century Radicalism," a sketch by artist Avrom Yanovsky (known for his caricatures and chalk-talks) of a rehearsal of three one-act-plays by Theatre of Action, the successor of the Workers' Theatre. The drawings are of the members of the theatre group reading, thinking, pointing, and presumably as characters in the plays identified by their initials: T.G. would be Toby Gordon Ryan, D.P., David Pressman, etc. The inclusion of an image for Theatre of Action clearly demonstrates Filewod's thesis about the continuity of Canadian radical theatre and Canadian theatre generally through the 1930s and 1940s: "There was nothing sudden about the emergence of a sustaining theatre culture [in the fifties]: it had always been there. The failure of theatre historiography in Canada is that it has tended to chart the historical progress of theatres as companies and structures rather than as practices" (150). Filewod effectively re-writes Canadian theatre history, correcting misconceptions that are widely accepted but wipe out part of our past, such as the 1953 Massey Commission report that declared Canadian theatre "moribund" (150). The discussion of theatre as practice continues into Chapter 6, "Generation Agitprop, with Puppets," which is graced with the poster advertising a one-off student performance about a professors' strike at the University of Guelph in 2008. This is chronologically puzzling but makes the point of the continued interest in agitprop decades after the groundbreaking work of the Vancouver Street Theatre and Ottawa's Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC) described in this chapter.

Chapter 8, on the popular theatre movement of the eighties, is introduced by a photo of Ground Zero's 1991 social action play *Where's the Care*, with actor Thandie Mpumlwana pushing back a giant puppet germ. It is the only photo of a performer of colour and it is fitting that it is here. While Filewod does write of racial diversity (or not) elsewhere—First Nations performers "playing Indian" in historical pageants (72), black performers in the Play-Actors of the forties (161), and a Sikh farmworkers' agitprop (203-204)—it is in this chapter that the primarily white and male leadership of radical theatre is criticized. Of the international meeting of popular theatre workers that spawned the Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance, Jan Selman comments, "To my middle-class, white, female, northern eyes this international crowd was very male (entirely), very patriarchal" (245), and Filewod admits that, "From the standpoint of the twenty-first century it seems inconceivable that a workshop on social action theatre would be predominantly male and that the Canadians would all be white" (246). It wasn't until the integrative gender-race-class phase of North American feminism that a greater effort was made to work interculturally and interracially. Still, as Filewod points out, in the nineties the leadership of the two surviving Theatre of the Oppressed Centres was still male and white: "Although the typifying popular theatre worker was as likely to be a woman of colour, the structures of the popular movement were still dominated by white men" (256).

Ultimately, *Committing Theatre* is a history of how radical theatre in Canada happens: how the work is born and gets done and how its theatre workers engage with ideology and practice. It is, as Filewod proposes, a process and a network of practices (17-19). The research is rigorous and extensive and the author's insider perspective of collaborations with radical artists enriches the theoretical tenor of the discussion, as do his personal anecdotes. Even when the political slant of the case studies is not "activist" in the progressive sense, the reader is drawn in, inspired to create interventionist performance and to "commit" theatre in the most radical sense.

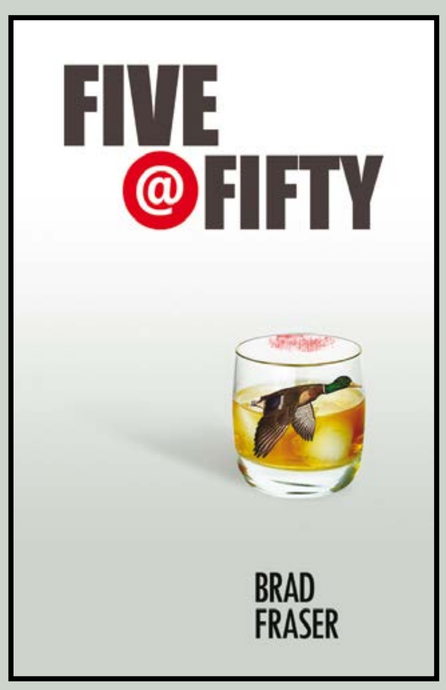






ROBERTA BARKER AND KIM SOLGA, EDITORS *NEW ESSAYS ON CANADIAN THEATRE VOL. 2: NEW CANADIAN REALISMS* **AND** *NEW CANADIAN REALISMS: EIGHT PLAYS*

JENNIFER TREMBLAY, TRANSLATED BY SHELLEY TEPPERMAN *THE LIST*



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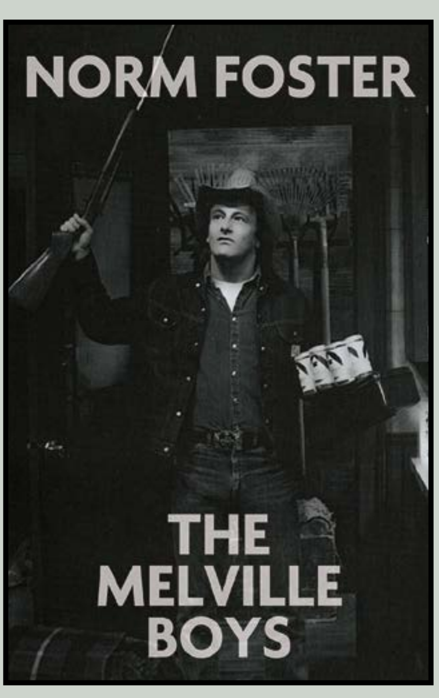

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