

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

by Leith Harris

*In the last issue, Savannah Walling reported on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside community play project. Not only was the event a huge success, but the process and the aftermath made many lives more successful. Hundreds of residents from an astounding variety of cultures, social classes, ages, and abilities worked hard together, and, with the help of a number of theatre professionals, mounted a spectacular historical saga called *In the Heart of a City*. The special bond that grew between the participants seems to magically keep growing even now, over a year later. This article is a kind of epilogue, describing the effects the experience has had on a few of the participants.*

Often I've heard overworked actors and production people commiserate prior to opening night, "What a lot of time, energy, and money for two weeks!" That's exactly what I thought when I first heard about the project. Having lived and worked in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver (supposedly the poorest postal code in Canada) for over twenty years, I've seen many initiatives and schemes come and go. Plans, paradigms, and projects imposed on the community from the outside usually fail. The community play idea, developed in rural England, raised many doubts in my mind. But I saw some familiar faces among the organizers, and they kept asking residents for their input. So I swallowed my scepticism and became the outreach coordinator for thirty of the pre-play workshops and the participant coordinator for the twelve weeks prior to performance.

Over a year later, I have close connections with the participants still. They are my friends, neighbours, and co-workers. Being in the community play project has touched and linked lives in profound ways, from professional (total career and lifestyle changes) to personal (increased career,

friendship, and love connections). I will present a few examples here, but there are hundreds more.

Each of the over fifty rehearsals began with one warm-up exercise — the imaginary ball toss. Sometimes the circle encompassed the huge hall, other times there were less than ten people. The idea was to catch the imaginary ball launched by director Jimmy Tait with a clap, then make eye contact with another person in the circle and throw the ball with another clap. No words. Sometimes Jimmy tossed up to five imaginary balls. Lots of action. Sometimes balls got dropped and lost. Lots of laughter. Each person's individual grace and clumsiness emerged. The mother of Emile Wilson, a ten-year-old Afro-Canadian boy who played four roles, told me her son had never been able to look an adult in the eye but now holds eye contact easily with most everyone. In the last year, Emile's self-confidence and school marks have soared. A visual alliance thrives between the people who played that game over and over.

Elwin Xie was a bored retail salesman before his involvement in the play — now he's a professional actor juggling offers. Born to a recently immigrated Chinese mother who had been separated from his father by the Exclusion Act, Elwin grew up in Chinatown during the sixties. In the eighties I knew him as a community activist, but he left the area and I didn't see him again until the auditions. Not only did Elwin play four roles brilliantly, he and his

"Plans, paradigms, and projects imposed on the community from the outside usually fail."

girlfriend donated hundreds of hours making props, sewing costumes, and building and painting the set. Soon after the community play ended, Elwin was urged by Terry and Savannah (Vancouver Moving Theatre) to audition for a permanent theatre production in Gastown, a fancy tourist area in Vancouver's Eastside. He ripped out his picture from the *In the Heart of a City* program guide and auditioned. He has been performing full time (medical and dental plans included) ever since, but will take a leave of absence to act in Jimmy Tait's theatre adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*. Extremely influenced by his *Heart of a City* role as a lost Chinese railroad worker (Elwin's own grandfather worked the rails) who is rescued by a Native woman, Elwin feels the Chinese have a debt to pay the First Nations Community. He has become a mentor for First Nations youths with the local Aboriginal Friendship Centre. On Tuesdays, he also volunteers to help young Native students at the elementary school that he attended. Elwin feels the play experience has brought him full circle, and he's loving it.

Downtown Eastside resident Sandra Pronteau of Cree/Metis heritage also acted for the first time in the community play and hasn't looked back. She has since starred in a play on homelessness and in the recent Downtown Eastside Cultural Festival History Walk presentations. A dedicated advocate and First Nations spokesperson for

many years, Sandra wrote, "I learnt about hidden talent and that I can actually sing. I always felt I was a performer but on a political level instead. Little did I know that I would commit myself to getting creative and be the characters when needed."

Another person whose life was uplifted was longtime Downtown Eastsider Luke Day, who played two major and two minor roles. He writes:

In September of 2003 I was going through a very difficult time in my life. I was in a state of depression and despair, and living a surreal existence: I was working, but living on the street. I called Queen Elizabeth Park my home. I only found out about the community play because on the Sunday auditions took place at Carnegie the weather was abysmal and I went there to get out of the rain. I saw the audition notice and said why not? Once involved I began to regain hope. For the first month or so of rehearsals I still lived on the street, but soon got my life headed in the right direction. It is not a stretch to say that had I not become involved in the play my mental and physical health would have declined precipitously. The joy and sense of well being I received as part of that play ennobled and inspired me. I have been involved in two productions outside of the DTES this year.

Harriet Prince is an energetic and beautiful Obijibway great grandmother. She learned to sew in a residential school, worked in many textile factories, and was taking a fashion design course in 2003. She attended one of the Metis dancing (jigging) workshops. The fiddling and jigging brought back happy memories of her "parents packing us kids to halls where they rolled up the rugs and jigged all night." I asked Harriet if she could advise the costume crew about First Nations attire in the old days. She ended up sewing in the workshops at least three times a week, taking work home and returning with fantastic creations. She was also asked to play one of the grandmother roles and loved performing. Her son, who had been a make-up artist in Winnipeg, helped with the Opera inspired Chinese faces. Her daughter Brenda played two intense roles, and two of her granddaughters helped with

props. One of them also acted and the other did the childcare during the performances.

Brenda's oldest daughter brought her new baby to the opening night, making four generations of

Prince women present in the house! Harriet said this was a dream come true because she hadn't had much of a family life. Harriet is now designing and sewing the outfits for Vancouver's Metis dance troupes.

Brenda wrote, "Participating in the community play was the realization and completion of a life-long secret dream of

mine. I was given the opportunity to act on stage. I am a shy person but I knew I could do it. It gave me more confidence and sense of community because I see the people who were part of the play today and we have a bond because of those magic moments last winter." Harriet, Brenda, and Harriet's granddaughter Dakota, along with five other community play participants, performed with a local professional drum group in the recent Downtown Eastside Cultural Arts festival.

Like Brenda, Joelysa Panakea's self-confidence has risen since her participation in the play. Joelysa, a young Indo-Canadian from Uganda, was the assistant musical director. She is proud that she was able to interact with so many different cultures, languages, ages, and musical talents. Joelysa never looked down on anyone no matter how "off-key" they were. She kept repeating how "real" the participants were and "like a family." As the daughter of Hindu/Muslim parents growing up in Africa and then coming to Canada, she sometimes felt part of the lost generation. Integrating and feeling welcome in this urban community — which she had thought was dangerous — was a wonderful experience. Joelysa and Jimmy Tait have continued to work together and directed three staged readings of plays written by emerging local writers for the DTES Cultural Festival. They are also collaborating on the *Crime and Punishment* project, which involves five of the community play actors. Whenever a fellow participant is acting in another play, *Heart of a City* supporters are sure to be in the audience.

Everybody loves Jimmy Tait, the director. I've seen so many eyes light up when his

"To me,
he seems like
an alchemist or a
magician seeking
out gems — polishing,
expanding, and igniting
them until they
glisten as stars."

name is mentioned. He flattered the best out of us all. To me, he seems like an alchemist or a magician seeking out gems — polishing, expanding, and igniting them until they glisten as stars. Within a few days, Jimmy could connect over one hundred new names with faces. Susan Poshan Wong, also a first-time actor, was in awe of Jimmy's memory for names: she said English-speaking Canadians always forget or call her someone else's name. Jimmy would respond to this with something like, "Well, I had your pictures and you're all so uniquely beautiful." Jimmy makes people feel good and want to give their best. And they did. When asked how the community play has affected his career, Jimmy went on in eloquent terms for twenty minutes. He was deeply moved by the variety — and the simplicity:

Different cultures, different walks of life exploring expression at its root produced a great deal of power that couldn't be ignored. Professional theatre can be overworked, overloaded to the detriment and overstimulation of the audience. This play reminded me that theatre was a community event where one group could guide another through everyone's experience. It reminded me that theatre could be a spiritual event where one group of people holds a simple thought, word, gesture and the audience is drawn in.

The most valuable capacity-building tool I learned in this process was from watching Jimmy's style of constant appreciation, encouragement, and humour. The saying "What goes around, comes around" was always immediately realized in his presence, as faces brightened in response. Jimmy says he gets tremendous support and considers himself "a very lucky soul on this planet."

Vancouver Moving Theatre (Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling) has definitely embraced and expanded the circle. The extensive and sensitive follow-up has been such a welcome relief. Savannah wrote that they felt they were responsible for providing "post-project transition events to close the circle on the project in a helpful way and ease the inevitable post-production let down" (something many of us were worried about). Not just events, but follow-up letters, phone calls, e-mails to participants, and opportunities were offered whenever possible with lots of encouragement. These together with the massive community enthusiasm for more projects ensure that each ending becomes a new beginning. Many tender and lasting connections formed between cultures, classes, and generations to create this magic circle. Many of the participants expressed how surprised they were at just how rich the

● continued on page 15

continued from page 5

the importance of keeping in touch with these profound roots for Raji: why she strives to stay true to them while going her own way in her life in Canada.

In spite of my initial trepidation, I was able to find a path as director and dramaturge in this project through my interest in the lives disclosed to me, my admiration for what I encountered, and my delight in the beauty and mystery of Indian culture. Thanks to *Utthel/Athe*, a fragment of Indo-Canadian reality has been revealed to me. The response of our audiences show that they also experience a sense of discovery and admiration. *Utthel/Athe* remains in PUENTE's repertory, and we consider it a piece that truly expresses our mandate of building bridges between individuals and between cultures.●

continued from page 10

history of our neighbourhood is and how much we are a part of it. Most of us want to do it again. The circle grows stronger.●

In the Heart of the City, The Downtown Eastside community play, was produced by the Carnegie Community Centre and Vancouver Moving Theatre in the fall of 2003 in Vancouver BC.

Leith Harris has lived, worked, played sports, and belonged to theatre and writing groups in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver for about twenty years. With the Downtown Eastside Women's Writing Group, she published poetry in *Rituals of Rock* and wrote one-sixth of the stage musical *Rare Earth Arias*. She also published work in *Surviving with Grace*, a poetry/prose anthology, and she will have a poem published next spring in the Poetry Institute's anthology of Canadian Poets, *The Golden Morning*. Leith's first stage play, *Fits the Description*, was read last fall in a Vancouver Moving Theatre production.

continued from page 12

as those between players and the community — releases a flow of forgotten continuities and repressed energies, radically changing traditional roles. Actors have taken over the functions of playwright and director and are apparently exercising them collectively, without any form of hierarchy or outside control.

This can all be seen as part of the great struggle to resume the democratization of European culture, which was taken over by the state in the sixteenth century when it was nationalised as part of an overall strategy of control by the emergent absolute monarchies. Culture was harnessed to authority — a trend that has always been resisted and subverted in the Low Countries. This was not just a question of content (culture could express a variety of ideologies) but of form. The theatre became the focus of culture and the model of the body politic. Perspective and authority were (literally) built into the theatre à l'italienne, implicitly limiting all points of view other than that from the Royal Box. Bourgeois theatre subsequently strove to give all spectators an equivalent view (the cinema and TV have maintained this). But while equality progressed, authority, with its fixed perspective, remained; even when the theatre in the round did away with fixed perspective, authority was maintained.

Dood Paard aims at reducing and even eliminating both perspective and authority, and it succeeds to a remarkable extent in doing so. The company is an "actors' collective," part of a Flemish and Dutch movement that has developed over the past decade and a half. Projects are discussed and tried out around a table at great length and in public. Once they are felt to have taken shape, and after a few rehearsals, they are summarily staged. But this is in fact merely a beginning. The audience is closely watched, its response to every word and movement solicited and carefully tested by each actor and by the troupe as a whole. The performance evolves; no two shows are quite the same. The play becomes interplay: a jam session driven by a competitive-cooperative improvisation with each participant developing his part as he thinks fit, in exuberant but comradely conversation with his fellows. Drama is the continuation of this dialogue and its extension into the audience. Gradually theatre loses its fixity, becoming more and more dynamic.

This is impressive. First of all, paradoxically, in its sheer Dutch anti-pretentiousness. Bringing about a radical democratisation of theatre relationships, it enables the players to embrace media- and pop-culture and to subvert and subsume them in fusion and confusion with classical culture. A verbal jazz puts across the Medea myth simultaneously in all its versions, from Euripides and Seneca to Pasolini and Heiner Mueller, recreating it as a vast rap. One gains a glimpse of what it would be like to live in culture that was whole, unified in all its historic depth, from ancient Greece to post-modernity, delivered from the usual academic and mediatic mediations, its rifts healed, vibrant and free.

Something of that sort, I think, is what MedEia achieves. The prophecy is unforgettable.●

Born in South Africa, Donald Moerdijk emigrated as soon as he was able to France, where he studied philosophy and has lived for the past fifty years, most of them teaching language, literature, and cultural studies at an Ecole normale supérieure. He has published a book (*Anti-Development: South Africa and its Bantustans*), as well as articles in France, Italy, and South Africa. Returning to his native land in 1993, he taught for a few years at the University of the Witwatersrand.