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WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER:
Negotiating Collaborative Creation in a Play about Addiction.
By Savannah Walling with contributions from co-writers

In 2005, Vancouver Moving Theatre began a series of workshops, forums, and interviews exploring the roots of addiction with people from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. *We're All in This Together* is the giant screen shadow play that emerged almost three years later from the recollections of over one thousand residents and their collaborations with two teams of designers, musicians, directors, and writers; guest artists from Calgary and San Francisco; and over fifty community performers and crew.



The play was created and performed by people who have struggled with addiction—either in their own lives or in the lives of loved ones, friends, colleagues, and neighbours. Hundreds of community members—Aboriginal, Asian, Anglo, Hispanic, and Black Canadian—coming from the four corners of the globe and many walks of life contributed. We negotiated a collaborative creative process with twelve co-writers. We wanted to build an original script for a Downtown Eastside style of theatre inspired by the thousand-year-old tradition of shadow theatre. Painted images of inner city environments, two-dimensional puppets, three-dimensional models, and masked actors were projected onto a fifteen-by-thirty-foot screen by stationary and mobile lamps. In front of the screen, actors appeared; a chorus spoke and sang to the audience; and a five-piece band provided live music.

The project was enormously complex. How do you get such a diverse group of people to work on the same project and make something that not only comes in on schedule but is artistically coherent and meaningful? The collaborative journey was astonishing. “The play used a grassroots community development process,” said community co-writer Mary Duffy, “hugely consultative of the community, involving hundreds of contributors at every level who brought their own particular gifts and experiences.”¹

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The reality is like organizing an epic ball game. You make sure that everyone is playing the same game, playing by the same rules, and striving to achieve the same overall goals. You define the

boundaries of your ball park, the number of players involved, who does what, and who reports to whom. (If you don't take the time to organize your game play, grappling over artistic control can get very, very ugly.) Building a strong foundation that's understood, shaped, and respected by all the players helps everyone to negotiate the inevitable bumps on creative journeys that deal with tough themes. It's not about building the perfect game—it's about building one that works for this time and place and these particular players.

We began by defining our playing field—the territory of addiction.

*Take only a little from a healer's hand,
My gift can help, my gift can heal.
But treat my treasure with disrespect,
You'll want more and more.*²

Vancouver Moving Theatre was inspired by a similar project in the rural community of Enderby, B.C., in which a shadow play on addiction (*Enough is Enough*) was created by Runaway Moon Theatre for and with the Spallumcheen Indian Band. We were spurred to work with our Downtown Eastside community to build an original play about addiction out of inner city stories, images, and concerns.

A tidal wave of addiction is sweeping over our cities and countrysides. In the words of Chinese Canadian community writer Wendy Chew, “In ancient times or modern times [...] in the West or around the world—people use drugs or alcohol to release their burden and stress.”

*One man's pleasure is a another man's poison
Is another man's bread and butter.*

“What we see here in the Downtown Eastside,” said resident Mark Budgen, “is a tiny fraction of what's happening in the province. The major consumers of the drugs are middle class.”

*Our stories never disappear
But like ancient rivers they resurface.*

Stephen Lytton, Interior Salish Thompson community writer, remarked, “My purpose is that the issue is real and I deal with it daily. [...] It was more than just a play. It was about humanity and community. The Downtown Eastside is the poorest postal code of Canada. [...] There's nowhere for us to retreat. We live, eat, and sleep the issues of the day. But I want to share the strength, the heart and soul of this community. Our hope is to change the fear factor and to change stereotypical ideas about the Downtown Eastside.”³

We looked for strong artists and advisers to help work out the rules of the game. As head writer, I organized community outreach and

research. I also oversaw the final script in agreement with cultural protocols, under the advisory of the other writers and the community's feedback. Contributing writer James Fagan Tait—who directed and co-wrote Enderby's *Enough is Enough*—helped construct a guiding frame and ground rules for the collaborative writing process. The plan combined a vertical hierarchical organizing structure with lots of opportunities for horizontal input from contributing co-writers and public. Rosemary Georgeson (Coast Salish / Métis co-writer) provided cultural advice, cast hospitality, and a listening ear. Having been clean and sober for five years, she felt the story needed more than just a political focus. Rose's family has been intertwined with the Downtown Eastside “since it was still just trees and beach and clam beds.” She knew it was a project she had to be a part of. “It has to do with my family's history in the Downtown Eastside and how it has affected them over the generations and seeing the effects (of a once thriving area) go downhill so rapidly.”

Jimmy, Rose, and I decided to look for a representational anecdote that embodied contributions from community members to communicate the taste and reality of what goes on inside addiction. Our story would communicate the experience of someone through the phases of addiction: when they are not addicted, their journey facing addiction, their life inside it, and the hard, hard work of recovery.

Our first step was to interview one hundred people at the Carnegie Community Centre. We asked them how addiction affected their lives and world. Did they have a powerful story or image of addiction—or recovery—to share? In the words of Rose, “People told us about lots of addictions, but overwhelmingly the stories we heard were around alcohol and drugs. The stories [were] personal and tragic. That's why they came out. They wanted them to be heard.” Themes and characters emerged from our research, forming a collective voice telling stories of addiction over and over again. Rose, Jimmy, and I independently created scenarios from these stories and images. We merged and distilled this material into a framing scenario of twelve scenes: the narrative anchors.

Our second step was to invite nine writers and poets involved in the Downtown Eastside to join the game: writers with a history in the community, a personal relationship with the theme of addiction, and experience with collaborative community process. We gave each writer the scenario and delegated a scene to each one. We invited contributions of dialogue, action, characters, songs, and images. If their reaction was “I hate this scene,” they were free to write another scene and submit it. “As long as your scene begins and ends the same way as the scenario you were handed,” said Jimmy, “we can connect the dots.”

Our third step was to organize a shadow theatre workshop intensive with Alberta's David Chantler (Trickster Theatre). Out of these workshops emerged visual images; a filmic mode of storytelling; and more opportunities for community input.

Further along on our journey we staged several scenes with live music and projected shadows (2005 DTES Heart of the City Festival) for the public. Spectators told us what elements made an impact, what they wanted more of, where they were confused. They told us how they wanted the play to end: with death and recovery; realistic hope and no Hollywood endings; with questions posed to the spectators about their roles in addiction.

Hours and hours and days and days followed—reading, processing, and distilling information and feedback we'd gathered throughout the year.

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Sometimes it felt like we were stitching together a five-thousand-piece patchwork quilt with a compelling story. Other times I felt like we were teams of builders collaborating over three generations to build a cathedral. The experience was way bigger than any of us expected it to be because of its length and scale. Addiction was a tough and stressful issue complicated by everyone's experiences around the subject. Working on the script triggered emotions and memories. Some people—including our co-writer Jimmy—decided not to continue onto phase two because of the demands of the project's length and intensity.

Many times, we were sure the project would crash. But it just wouldn't die. Every time we thought the game was over, a new player from left field came forward. San Francisco shadow theatre specialist Larry Reed arrived to lead workshops to develop visual storytelling elements and integrate cinematic editing techniques with story dramaturgy.⁴ Playwright Marie Clements invited the co-writers to Galiano Island to participate in a week-long writers' retreat as part of the Fathom Labs Developmental Laboratory Project.

During the retreat, we added what was missing, deepened characterizations and storylines, and edited and edited. Community writers focused on the scenic "pearls" with a final veto on their material and how it was used. Rose and I worked on through-lines, linking all the "pearls" into one narrative necklace. "My favourite memories," said community writer Leith Harris, "are of the relaxed riffing at the Fathom Labs retreat. The week was a huge success, both creatively and therapeutically." Wendy Chew echoed his comments: "We all had the opportunity to learn from each other. Everybody becomes a teacher."

As you put your shoulder to the wheel of the emerging collective vision, you mourn for the play you alone would have created. We questioned the process all the time.



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But collaboration is not always fun. A group's collective voice emerges with a distinctive personality and demands. Doing something that the individuals could not have done on their own also means they don't get to do what they *would* have done on their own. You lose personal freedom. Personal cre-

ativity can feel stifled. As you put your shoulder to the wheel of the emerging collective vision, you mourn for the play you alone would have created. We questioned the process all the time.

Each writer had a different reaction to our collective beast: "I like the overview of it" . . . "I didn't know what to expect but I think I can work with this" . . . "It's got a lot of potential, but I hate the scene I've got. It triggered emotions around my mom" . . . "I am so disappointed. It is so stereotyping with cookie-cutter people" . . . "What's missing? We have to put it back in" . . . "The combination of every voice will create something cool."

We faced a huge learning curve.

How do you balance three different "languages"—visual, verbal and musical—and end up with a meaningful, digestible and compelling narrative? Puppets have a limited emotional range. Everything on the giant screen has more importance than what's around it. Static images with talking heads don't sustain interest.

To address these challenges, we developed recognizable, self-evident characters of emotional weight and complexity. We externalized verbal ideas into action. We streamlined text to allow time for image, action, and music to do their jobs. We incorporated surreal and fantastical elements (puppets aren't limited by gravity's laws). We changed scale to move through different levels of reality, create physical depth, and psychological layering. We stimulated interest moment-to-moment by manipulating scale and viewing angles, providing cinematic transitions (cuts, dissolves, zooms). We identified which "language" was the key "driver" of each scene. We expanded moments of emotional crystallization into song. We stripped away adjectives and adverbs, coming up with economical, evocative descriptions of physical action expressed with nouns and verbs.

At the same time, we were navigating difficult emotional territory. "I detached myself from my story when I was doing it," Rose said, "it was easier for me to do this. But having all this information coming at me, it opened the doors to a lot of stuff that I'd put behind, bringing it all back to me—my stories and my journey—so a lot of my life did creep into it. But it wasn't like it was my story, because everyone who has been involved with this project has been touched by addiction, abuse, some part of this story. So if I took from my life in any way—any part parts of it—it was something that was out there anyway. So it wasn't just my story that I was telling."

"By opening the door in the beginning," Rose added, "for people to come out and share their stories

with addiction—it opened the door for everyone to be open and honest. They wanted to share. They wanted it out there! It was like lightening the load. [. . .] and that came from the collaborative process—of everyone coming together. There was support in it."

But the support was daunting: the script kept growing in size. The more we reduced it the longer it seemed to get. The community and co-writers were bringing more and more characters, more songs, more situations. I was as bad as the rest—I added a dragon. Two weeks before rehearsals began, director Kim Collier laid down the law: Boil your three hour saga down to fifty-five minutes or we won't have time to get it up; every minute of shadow theatre requires one hour to stage.

"When you have a thousand people giving input in some way," Rose said, "and you're trying to take everyone's words and feelings into account in some way and recognize everyone and break it down into fifty-five minutes—that's the most overwhelming part of it all to me—that we were able to do it and we didn't lose any of the storyline. It intensified."

By the time we came to the end of our process, we uncovered our representative anecdote, opening a door onto three generations of a family in a progression through recovery. As the play unfolds, two families from different social backgrounds encounter humanity's struggle with addictions. Out of the shadows emerge their dreams and memories, fears, hopes, and visions. In an inner city family, a child dreams of a dragon's irresistible treasure. His young mother struggles to survive and live sober in this world; his lost aunt strives to climb back to health; his grandmother copes with ancestral memories of dislocation. In an interweaving sub-story, an average family from the suburbs reminds us how life's pleasures can grow into habits that take over and run people's lives, while three people employed in the illegal—and legal—global pharmaceutical business argue over their success in profiting from human misery.



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*It's a wake-up call
It's for us all
We've got an allergic reaction
To dislocation, isolation,
Cultural destruction and the human condition.*

"The play is like Rosa's stew," said Mary, "meaty, complex, and flavourful with all our voices [. . .]. Working with this project has been one of the highlights of my seven years here and I treasure the memory. [It] provided a new community for myself and my younger daughter. I was connected to so many different people. We shared so much throughout the two years, that now when I meet one of them on the street, on a bus, I feel the joy of encountering a beloved family member."

The feedback from the process is overwhelmingly positive: "We couldn't have done it without everyone's input" (Rose) . . . "I found the Shadows Project intense, exciting, demanding, rewarding and challenging. I learned about working cooperatively with others and my need to learn more" (Patrick) . . . "I feel we did a very good thing for the people—opening the discussion on addiction. We have done a very good job of empowering ourselves" (Wendy) . . . "I learned a lot about other's addictions and my own. I'm still trying to understand" (Leith) . . . "I've learned that we in North America, First Nations, are not the only ones battling and struggling with demons. It's right across the board, from one continent to another" (Stephen).

The Carnegie Newsletter stated, "This play is much more than mere entertainment. It depicts the suffering of real human beings and tries to understand that suffering. I feel proud of the Downtown Eastside residents who took part in the play. You were wonderful. You showed the creativity and talent of our community."

"Even now," said Patrick Foley, "I look back on the Shadows Project in amazement. Here we have the Downtown Eastside, a skid-road neigh-

borhood if there ever was one, vulnerable to re-development destroying the fabric of the neighborhood, saddled with many social problems, some pushed onto it by outside neighbourhoods and governments, named the poorest neighborhood in Canada. And yet, if given an opportunity, the people here can create interesting, moving, and mesmerizing work. People came from the neighborhood and outside too. They packed the house. And when it was over, what did they do? Why, they stood up, clapped, whistled, and cheered at our humble effort and said, more!"

Inspired by stories, dreams and images from people of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, *We're All in This Together* was co-written by writers Rosemary Georgeson and Savannah Walling with Sheila Baxter, Wendy Chew, Paul Decarie, Mary Duffy, Melissa Eror, Patrick Foley, Leith Harris, Stephen Lytton, and Muriel Williams; with contributions by Larry Reed, James Fagan Tait, Marie Clements and cast members; and with dramaturgy by Clements and play directors.

We're All in This Together premiered at the Russian Hall May 2007 playing to sold-out audiences. The play was produced by Vancouver Moving Theatre in association with the Carnegie Community Centre and the Fathom Labs Project. Conception by Artistic Director Savannah Walling, direction by Kim Collier, design by Tamara Unroe, music by Joelysa Pankanea and Ya-Wen V. Wang, lighting by Adrian Muir assisted by Lauchlin Johnson, stage managed by Robin Bancroft-Wilson, and produced by Terry Hunter.

NOTES

¹ All quotes from project participants are from conversations with the author throughout the process.

² All italicized text quotes are from *We're All in This Together*.

³ For descriptions of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, see "Arts, Social Action and Cultural Diversity in the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival," *alt.theatre* 5.2 (2007): 30-35; and "The Downtown Eastside Community Play," *alt.theatre* 3.4 (2005): 12-15.

⁴ Shadowlight Productions was founded in 1972 in San Francisco by Artistic Director Larry Reed. The company provides teaching materials, workshops, and documentary films. www.shadowlight.org

BIO

Savannah Walling IS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF VANCOUVER MOVING THEATRE, A PROFESSIONAL INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS COMPANY SHE CO-FOUNDED TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO WITH EXECUTIVE PRODUCER TERRY HUNTER. INSPIRED BY THEIR PACIFIC RIM DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE HOME, THE SMALL COMPANY (A MEMBER OF THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE COMMUNITY ARTS NETWORK) DEVELOPS PROJECTS IN COLLABORATION WITH ARTISTS FROM MANY GENRES, TECHNIQUES, AND CULTURAL TRADITIONS. AFTER TOURING INTERNATIONALLY FOR FIFTEEN YEARS, THEY NOW FOCUS ON ARTS-BASED COMMUNITY PROJECTS IN THEIR INNER CITY HOME.