ON SHELF UNTIL JANUARY 1994

THEATRUM

the theatre magazine

WINTER 1993/94 ISSUE no. 36 $4.25

Interdisciplinary Theatre

ACTOR-DIRECTOR Relationship

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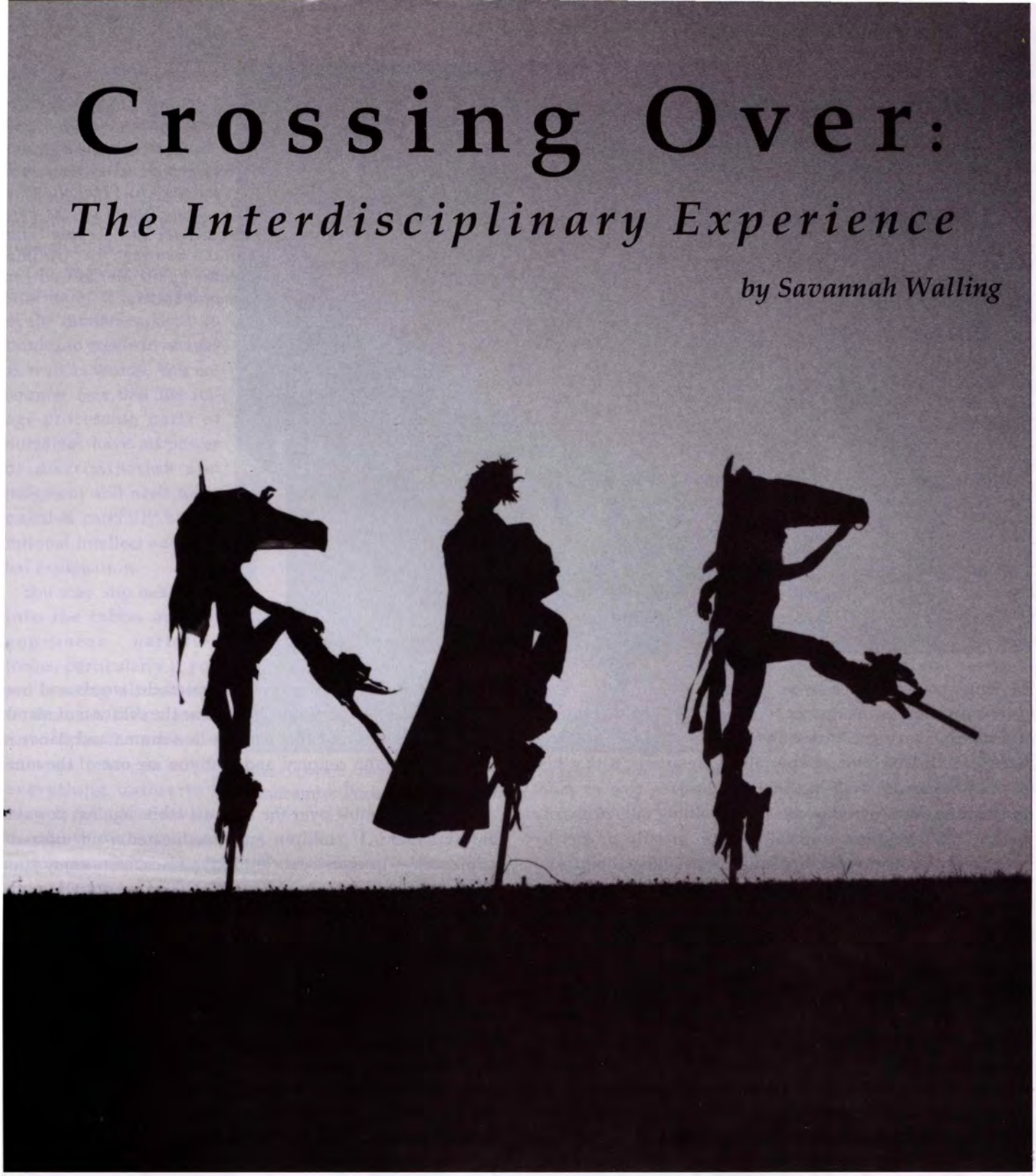
Crossing Over:

The Interdisciplinary Experience

by Savannah Walling



We, the performing artists who cross disciplines, inherit a worldwide tradition that is thousands of years old. Its history includes religious and secular ceremonies, classical dance dramas, liturgical dramas, mystery and mumming plays, masques and drum dancing. Two to three hundred years ago in Europe, the tradition was gradually subdivided into literary drama and the theatrical arts (ballet, contemporary dance, opera, musical theatre, mime and clowning.) This is the subdivision that we have inherited in North America.

We who cross disciplines also inherit a contemporary European movement to reunite the separated disciplines. This movement has included the experimental works of ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev; theatre artist and writer Antonin Artaud; and opera composer/librettist Richard Wagner.

We who cross disciplines are also participants in a similar Canadian movement that includes the Quebecois experimental productions of Théâtre Répère, Création Isis, Carbone 14, and Le Cirque du Soleil, as well as the English Canadian experimental productions of R. Murray Schafer, Public Dreams Society, and my own company, Vancouver

MICRAND

Party of Lost Souls, *1992: The dead walk the earth each year when Vancouver's Public Dreams Society brings art to the streets for Hallowe'en. Previous page: Stiltwalking beasts on the horizon make the case for non-traditional venues in* Animal Dreams *by the Mortal Coil Performance Society.*

Moving Theatre.

In Vancouver, as in much of North America, contemporary interdisciplinary creation has been emerging from three streams. Interdisciplinary specialists are artists with a history of work and training that synthesizes two or more performing arts. Artists whose basic training falls primarily within one discipline may collaborate, usually project by project, with artists from other disciplines. Visual performance art is created and performed by artists with basic training in one or more of the visual arts. The work of Vancouver Moving Theatre has been rooted primarily in the first category — that of the hardcore interdisciplinary specialist. I believe this to be the most difficult, most thankless and most exciting stream, and it is the one about which I can speak from personal experience.

Whatever pathway you follow into interdisicplinary work, chances are that you are subjected to attack from a variety of directions, for a variety of reasons. Redefining the arts is a political act. You can measure the strength of your vision by the strength of the resistance that is mounted to combat or subvert it. To understand why, and to learn how to combat politely insidious and passionately vicious attacks, you need to both understand and recognize important unstated cultural taboos.

In your enthusiasm to cross boundaries and create a new form, you will probably encounter disciplinary taboos against the very process of crossing disciplines. Your work may be labeled "theatricalism" and "spectacle" by traditional dramatists and dancers. Playwrights and directors may suspect that your work attacks the future of literary drama if you subordinate words to choreography and stage design. Choreographers may conclude that your work subordinates dance gesture to visual spectacle, words and music. Many disciplinary specialists fear the dilution of standards. They are afraid that serious live drama and dance is dying in the 20th century, and that you are one of the murderers.

You may stumble over the high art taboo against popular entertainment. If children and uneducated, "uncultured" audiences — or worse yet, "ethnic" audiences — enjoy your work, the assumption may be made that you are succeeding simply by providing crude entertainment, colourful spectacle, half-baked ideas, cheap sensation and light diversion. Obviously you are not providing thoughtful, fashionable entertainment for an intellectual and social elite. You're diluting standards again.

You may mire yourself in the taboo that considers children's performance to be second-class. This taboo assumes that children's minds are second-class minds. Performances created for them are assumed to be less sophisticated than works created for adults, to lack artistic quality, complexity and depth (ticket prices are usually cheaper, and the performances are usually staged at matinees with few technical resources).

This taboo assumes that children's performances primarily provide didactic experiences or childish entertainment, and absolutely contradicts the view of writer C.S. Lewis, that "no book is worth reading at ten that is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of 50."

You may slide feet-first into the taboo that is mislabeled emotional manipulation, if you create non-verbal performance forms that elicit primal feelings without relying on plot, culturally specific characterization or linear narrative. Responses are intensified if you use slowed motion, repeti-

tion, driving rhythms and other techniques that heighten awareness and perception, allowing the viewer's own thoughts and internal visions to mingle with the experience on stage.

You may experience first-hand the suspicion of the human capacity to think and create in images as well as words. You encounter fear that the image-processing parts of ourselves have no power of discrimination and judgment and need to be guarded carefully by the rational intellect and verbal explanation.

You may slip head-first into the taboo against non-linear narrative forms, particularly if you are creating alternatives to dramatic forms structured upon the male sexual experience, in which everything builds to a very large one-time climax (at this point, illumination occurs and all questions are explained.) Alternative dramatic forms, such as those based on cyclical, recurring structures and accumulating series of climaxes, may result in open-ended conclusions that provide questions rather than resolutions. Such forms can arouse intense anxiety and vitriolic responses in some viewers.

DAVID COOPER

Above: Dream Mother performed by Terry Hunter from the production Samarambi: Pounding of the Heart.

If you point out that precedents for non-linear narrative forms occur in performance around the world, then you have the opportunity to lock horns with another taboo: the prejudice against non-European-derived cultural forms. In this case, you are labeled "going native" (now redefined as "cultural appropriation") or "ethnic." In either case, your work is dismissed as being simple (read simplistic), lacking in artistic quality and complexity, and probably a collective expression of unsophisticated (and perhaps poorly trained) artists. Regardless of the work's quality, assessors and critics will question its relevance to the times in which it has been created.

The taboo against collaborative creation may hit you below the belt. This taboo simultaneously fears that artistic standards will be diluted (after all, no one is assuming full responsibility), and secretly assumes that all artistic collaborations are really the brainstorm of one creator. (Remember that collaborative creation threatens the primacy of a playwright and script, while improvisation suggests the possibility that actors may seize creative control from the script and director.)

Within this mindset, creative collaboration is considered a naïve attempt to circumvent a fundamental "truth:" that primary creation results from the minds of individualistic geniuses, bold individuals who rupture tradition and singlehandedly change the course of history. Do not be surprised by accusations of laziness, incompetence and lack of imagination.

You may uncover a nest of unsuspected escalating complications if you cross the taboo that discredits non-traditional venues. Traditional venues are sacred places whose true function is to reinforce barriers between those who have received grace and those who have not. Worth is determined in terms of critical attention and hard currency. Both are frequently scarce in non-traditional venues.

Audiences and critics like to have surroundings that explain to them whether or not what you are doing is art. Expensive tickets, eager crowds, a religious silence imposed in the performance hall, elaborate lighting and technical effects, a beautiful framing lobby, a location in a "good" part of town: all these are cues for viewers unfamiliar with your work. These cues indicate whether your performance is appropriate for sophisticated adult consumption, or should instead be marginalized as an exotic novelty spectacle suitable for children, an uneducated proletariat, and experimental artists.

You may knock yourself out over the taboo against the extended creative process. Our experience in interdisciplinary creation has shown us that there is a tremendous advantage in working with the same piece over and over. Historically, many of the finest works from the world's interdisciplinary repertoire have been developed over many generations — sometimes for centuries. The strongest works never stop growing.

Characters grow stronger and stronger as performers and performance works mature. Costumes, masks, and musical instruments even seem to get stronger when stored over a season. There are always new audiences in new cities, and with each new year. We have also noticed that audiences welcome the return of favorite works, including once-alien

forms that over time have become familiar and recognizable. The problem is that the funding bodies, critics, and booking agents do not like to see the annual reappearance and ongoing development of repertoire.

You may tumble rapidly head-over-heels into the taboo against multiple interpretations. This taboo values the unambiguous interpretation, elicited by directorial control that anticipates, channels and controls audience response. Although in daily life people are constantly giving their own interpretations and values to what they see and experience, this confidence often dissipates in formal theatrical settings.

To free the performance audience from preordained meaning, to actively stimulate the audience's internal generation of images, to restore the audience's trust in personal observation, intuition and experience — these are political acts. They remove "ownership" of meaning from the prerogatives of the creative team. They transform the spectator into a collaborator who completes the experience by giving personal meaning to the work. They open the performance work to a much larger audience, because no prior knowledge is required of those who enter; no social or intellectual barriers bar the way.

You will undoubtedly be tormented by one of the most frustratingly elusive taboos of all: the assumption that aesthetic taste is inborn, universal, and unvarying. It is often disguised as the need to maintain professional disciplinary standards. This taboo arises because what is of supreme importance to ourselves can seem insignificant, or worse yet, repugnant and unthinkable to others — and vice versa.

In your enthusiasm to cross boundaries and create a new form, you will meet enormous challenges. You will likely be challenged to create an original repertoire, an original training methodology, original compositional structures and unifying principles. You face collaborative complications, organizational nightmares, snail's-pace timing and funding headaches.

Original interdisciplinary repertoire may demand original musical scores, choreography, literary text or nonverbal dramatic scenarios, sets and costumes, films and videotapes. The development of this repertoire may require a creative team possessed of multiple skills, ranging from dance, theatre, clowning, puppetry and writing, to visual arts, film and video. It may also require the discovery of alternatives to traditional dramatic narrative that provide a sense of holistic completion.

In order to achieve a sophisticated standard of interdisciplinary performance, you either need to work with a highly professional, experienced collaborative team and a substantial budget, or be prepared to watch your work evolve over time from immature and simple to more mature and complex forms. You may discover that the most efficient choice is an extended development process that treats all repertoire as "works-in-progress," with performance of these works for an audience at every stage of their development, and the treatment of every engagement and tour as a new stage of theatrical creation.

To determine the kind of training needed to create and perform original work, you must understand the disciplines in which you are planning to work and the degree of performance refinement that is your goal (guerrilla street theatre? community public events? alternate galleries? mainstage productions?). You define the ballpark in which you are preparing to play, and the standards by which you will be assessed by audiences, peers, critics, and funding bodies.

If you are deeply committed to interdisciplinary creation, you also respect equally each of the disciplines in which you plan to work and ensure that you get the kind of training that the work requires. You then need to locate teachers with the experience and sensitivity to provide it.

Because there are no schools in Canada producing interdisciplinary specialists you may have to train your own performers, and even create your own training techniques. You probably face performers with uneven and widely varying skills. You need to train them in all the skills used in your particular cross disciplinary fusion, strengthening the ensemble members' weakest areas, narrowing the inequities in performance levels, and creating a unified performance style.

At the very least this means creating and implementing a methodology within each discipline that simultaneously advances the beginner and challenges the advanced performer. Physical techniques in dance, theatre, music, and puppetry require constant practice to maintain performance standards. This can consume an enormous amount of time, money, and energy. (Training in multiple disciplines of dance, percussion, theatre, voice, stilt dancing, drum dancing, and

INTERDISCIPLINARY SOURCES

- **Publications such as the *Asian Theatre Journal*, *The Drama Review*, and *Dance Perspectives***
- **Contemporary researchers, including dancer/anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku, theatre practitioners Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook, Kathy Foley, Richard Schechner and Phillip Zarilli**
- **Composer/musicologists like John Chernoff and Elizabeth Swados, visual artists like Robert Farris Thompson and anthropologists such as Jamake Highwater and Victor Turner**
- **Ancient interdisciplinary texts such as Zeami's 15th-century analysis of the Japanese Noh Drama and the Bharata Natyasastra, the East Indian encyclopedia of dramaturgy and technique dating from 200 A.D.**
- **Contemporary analyses of non-western performance forms by authors such as Kunio Komparu (Noh Drama) and I Made Bandem (Indonesian performance)**

mask characterization has consumed one-third to half my own company's rehearsal time).

From a training perspective, it is far more efficient to develop an interdisciplinary performer's skills within the repertoire than by starting to create a new work. New works usually involve a new combination of skills, a new expressive vocabulary, and new props, masks or musical instruments.

Your challenge is twofold: to cultivate the skills for simultaneous performance in multiple performing disciplines, and to strengthen the leadership and teaching abilities of your creative team so that they can generate a pool of performers with the skills needed to perform this type of work. Precedents for interdisciplinary performer training, performance forms, and alternative dramatic structures have been developed for generations around the world. Look around, travel, observe and reflect. Study from masters of both traditional and contemporary indigenous forms. (Remember that ballet, Decroux mime, and western literary theatre are only three of many indigenous forms.)

As an interdisciplinary artist you are called upon to co-ordinate complex collaborative processes, to create job descriptions and titles to suit them, and to develop new methods of public crediting that will satisfy all the participants as accurate and fair. In order to build long-term collaborative relationships, you need to practice effective communication skills, to give as well as take, to listen as well as talk, and to surmount problems constructively. You need to recognize what kind of human beings support the creative process and work, and what kind of performers can effectively realize the vision.

Effective, sophisticated interdisciplinary collaborations are assisted by giving collaborators lots of working space and by using parallel dramaturgy: a process in which the contributions of each discipline complement rather than duplicate each other.

The logistics are overwhelming — like planning for a battle campaign. You need the capacity to divide your attention between simultaneous activities without losing your focus in order to plan budgets, rehearsals and creation. Because you are creating a new performance form, you need the capacity to distinguish between long- and short-term goals and to plan accordingly.

You are also facing funding bodies who change their policies and guidelines very, very slowly — even in the best of economic times. As an interdisciplinary specialist, you are treated by funding bodies as an orphan cousin who belongs to no one. At best you are respected, pitied and ignored as much as possible. You are treated as a novelty, a kind of two-headed horse, and — definitely — low priority.

You may run into problems with foundations, institutions, and governmental funding bodies because their systems are not set up to accommodate interdisciplinary forms and projects. In fact, these bodies are becoming less and less accommodating to interdisciplinary and experimental forms as the economic situation worsens. Anything that is not part of the mainstream funding priorities is being assaulted or cut back.

BARRY BROOKS

Reinterpretation of popular iconography: Noam Gagnon in the Angel of History *Series by Vancouver's Ruby Slippers Production Society.*

Even established performing arts organizations are under siege. Funding is threatened; they exist in a state of continuing economic crisis. Audiences are shrinking, growing steadily older, whiter, and more yuppie; they are not evolving to reflect demographic changes. The audience base in Vancouver is shifting: 53 per cent of Vancouver children speak English as a second language. European-derived cultural forms in the live performing arts are not connecting with this new constituency. Arts funding is evaporating in schools — a loss of the next generation's audience.

Be prepared to fight the nationalization of culture. Decisions are being made about which institutions, which artists and organizations, which art forms will be allowed to represent our culture. Decisions are being made to determine who will be encouraged to exist and who will be encouraged to die. Decisions are being made about what is professional and relevant art — and what is not.

In the case of funding cutbacks, you may be threatened by disciplinary assessments. If you are operating on your own leading edge, for example, rather than the leading edge of theatre or dance, then you may not be considered a funding priority in harsh economic times. Regardless of your success in creating an original interdisciplinary performing art from, you may be denied funding because you have — or have not

— developed in the right way.

Perhaps the argument will be made that you can no longer seriously compete with other funding priorities in a dance, or theatre — or any other — disciplinary context; "We're sorry, the competition is just too intense. Although your work is manifesting new maturity, individual elements are not yet matured — especially those within our discipline." Perhaps the argument will express the regret that you have transmuted your component disciplines and can no longer be accommodated; "Our assessors say that it is not dance and it is not theatre."

The experience of my company within the current governmental funding environment has been quite a circus. We know that we are not an easy company to assess: we create original theatre pieces that use stylized movement, performer-produced original scores, stunning costumes and masks, clowning and audience interaction. Representatives of each discipline tend to look at us from their own terms of reference. We seem to be assessed more often on the basis of what we are not, than what we are. Dancers praise our costumes, music and emotional impact, and criticize our choreographic development. Theatre people praise our choreography, visual images and music and criticize our narrative line. No one yet has assessed our achievement in the context of interdisciplinary creation.

This year has been especially Kafka-esque for us: our provincial funding body asked us to define our role in dance — at the same time as our federal funding body asked us to demonstrate "where is the theatre" in our work. We have also been told by a notable of the Vancouver dance community that our most recent promo video is obviously not dance, while a notable of the theatre community warned us not to show it to theatre juries — because they think we are a dance company. We think the gods must be having a good laugh.

In order to survive as an interdisciplinary creator, you need to transform liabilities into strengths that can stimulate change. In other words, you need to use your lemons to make lemonade. You may find that the obstacles you encounter strengthen you by making you think seriously about your experiences, goals and resources.

You need to create your own definitions of what you are doing, or else other will define you — in their own terms. You need to educate critics about how to view, talk about and assess your new form. Otherwise you are vulnerable to crucifixion on the grounds that you are diluting standards or that — regardless of your success — you are not meeting standards in the context of any one single discipline.

Identify your market and your audience. Find the audience who will support your work without changing it, except in the natural way. The most effective and enduring operating strategy is to create a unique place of your own tied into a larger support community, and to avoid duplicating services provided by others. Artistic choices will gain support if you can respond to the needs of a community.

Once you define that niche, promote your work (even if you have to write and submit articles yourself!) Get this work talked about and seen. Make sure that you are visible and not forgotten — even by making yourself the irritant that cannot be ignored. Do your best to ensure that any attempts to deny your art form will inspire a public outcry from a larger community.

Come up with creative solutions that will enable you to fund your projects, and to support ongoing development of your performance form, style, and training program — all expensive propositions. Operating under inappropriate models (such as the short-term rehearsal models used in text-based theatre) will result in a predictable and monotonous pattern of wasted resources, chronic underachievement and stunted growth: crippled creations that never manifest their original promise.

In our company, our strategy has been to integrate an "in-process" creative philosophy with a regular pattern of public performance. Each production thus serves as a vehicle for examining and testing specific areas of performance research. Extensive touring provides a vehicle for developing individual performing skills, for testing and analyzing performance theory in practice and for generating new research material. We also concentrate on developing a very flexible repertoire that can be performed in a wide variety of contexts, and that may be presented in adaptations which feature individual scenes or characters from the larger work.

As an interdisciplinary artist, you should work with top quality collaborators and performers; they will also draw an audience. Set up a network of artists with similar interests and needs, in order to build support, present a common voice and communicate efficiently on a grassroots level. Build a lobbying base by affiliating yourself with professional arts organizations such as the Vancouver Cultural Alliance or the fledgling Vancouver Interdisciplinary Artists Centre Society.

If you do not have the needed support from the governmental funding bodies or from box office income — and you probably will not because interdisciplinary performance is neither understood, valued nor well funded — then you need to turn to your communities for new strategies of support. Look for new ways to merge what you want to do artistically with what you perceive as a need in the community.

Access non-traditional sources of public money for artistic creation — such as programs in education or social service, for example. Try developing relationships with small businesses; solicit donations "in kind." Bring together the community arts and the professional arts in order to increase audience and community support. (Some companies who operate in a popular folk style, such as Public Dreams Society, produce their interdisciplinary events with the support of extensive community and volunteer participation.)

You may find that your funding efforts will be more efficiently realized by generating a horizontal, community-based network than by devoting most of your time and energy to appeals directed upwards through vertical hierar-

DAVID COOPER

Only constant training in unusual disciplines like stilt dancing make a performer capable of performances like this one. Here, Danielle Beaudet and Terry Hunter as Kronis and Hehehe in Vancouver Moving Theatre's Samarambi: Pounding of the Hearts.

chies of unsupportive funding bodies. Many of the groups that are the strongest survivors today arose out of a community constituency and continue to perform from that constituency.

If you want to preserve your art form, you have the responsibility of passing on your knowledge to upcoming generations. Because there is not yet a large demand from the community of professional artists and institutions for this kind of training, you need to stimulate the need through the process of teaching and networking.

In order to pursue extended research and development and manifest long-term artistic goals, you need to develop a sound administrative base, financially stable, uncrippled by deficit. You must acquire artistic and administrative personnel, skills in planning, budgeting and writing, plus office equipment. Efficient office procedures and accurate record keeping can help you minimize administrative demands and maximize your scarce resources of time, people and money. Finally, by creating a positive working environment to house artists and staff, you encourage them to stay with you for "the long haul."

You will constantly be in danger of overextending yourself on every level in the creation of interdisciplinary work. This is partly because you are working on the edge of the unknown, because you are trying to address so many disciplines and collaborators simultaneously, and because you do not have enough funding, resources or support. You are also probably trying to maximize your resource support base.

You face the danger of ending up with a weak support base spread too thin. Consider carefully the choice to maintain ties to many multiple professional organizations — none of whom consider you a priority. (The paradox is that maintenance of a broad base of connections may give you to many more resources.) Essentialize. Priorize.

If you want to evolve a sophisticated, expressive and mature interdisciplinary art form, you need time. Think in terms of long-term development — and then plan how you will survive long enough to do it. Look into your heart and think about where you want to be in 20 years. Then focus upon the essential elements, rid yourself of all other concerns, and set to work.

We are living in cities undergoing profound transformation, in a century when our planet is attempting to cope with rapid and powerful forces of change that are potentially capable of overwhelming society. We are facing threats that transcend national and cultural boundaries. Our survival as cross disciplinary artists is dependent upon inner clarity, new survival strategies, creative alliances and strong foundations.

Why would anyone want to work in interdisciplinary performance forms? If you can survive within the field, you are rewarded by gifts that vastly surpass the challenges and obstacles (and also include fun and fulfillment.) As a cross

nelea performed by Carrie Nimmo from the production of
arambi: Pounding of the Heart

iplinary artist, you have the opportunity to create origi- unique and indigenous performance forms that express time, place and evolving community in which you live. you create these original forms, you are creating the ory and defining the identity of our culture.

Vancouver we have the opportunity to adapt creatively to swiftly changing demography by creating repertoire born ie meeting ground and cultural collisions between west- Canadian/Pacific Rim and eastern Canadian/European- ved cultural traditions. By providing an alternative to imitation of cultural forms created on other continents ther eras, we speak to the Vancouver artists and lay ons who say "I don't know who I am," "I don't know t a Canadian is anymore," "I don't know what is indi- ously mine anymore."

Canada we have the opportunity to join a movement in ting original, indigenous and contemporary perform- repertoire that is distinct from forms being developed ie U.S. and Europe. This is repertoire that has proven to arprisingly popular and accessible within Canada. It has proven to have an international appeal that is increas- y significant in the 20th-century global environment d on visual communications.

you are interested in short, quick-and-dirty kamikaze ects, you have the opportunity to create exciting events will turn traditional expectations topsy turvy, shake up ence perceptions and assumptions, and challenge them ee the world in new ways. If you are committed to -term development of a training technique, repertoire and method of documentation, you have the opportunity to create an original and classic performance repertoire that could endure and continue to develop beyond the time in which it was originally created — possibly for generations.

In exploring interdisciplinary creation, you could end up with an art form surprisingly popular with children, with sophisticated and unsophisticated performance audiences, and with world audiences. (This response can be spiritually refreshing, creatively inspiring and sometimes financially remunerative.) You are working in the oldest performance form of all, with roots located around the world in the psyches of members of each generation. By working within the deepest sources of the form, you may create work that appeals to a common heritage of young and old, in any language and culture. Audience members, creators and performers then become partners in a shared experience that touches into some universal prototypes within us all.

I believe that the interdisciplinary performing arts have a wonderful service to provide for audiences in the 20th century. These art forms have the potential to help bridge serious rifts that have developed within 20th-century North American culture — and that are now being exported around the world. These art forms have the potential to use the healing power of performance to bridge the rift between disciplines by developing training and creative processes that unite many disciplines within the single performer and touch a place inside the performer that gives meaning to all the disciplines.

They bridge the rift between audience and performer by creating opportunities for interactive performance experiences that help bridge the invisible fourth wall. They bridge the rift between professional and community arts by creating opportunities for interactive performance events that restore communication between community performers who practice the arts to develop skill and life-enhancing experience, and professionals who practice art for a living and a passion.

They bridge the rift between generations, by creating performances for the whole family that treat adults and children as equal partners and help make whole the circle between elder parent and child; between cultures, by taking the time to acknowledge, learn from, and absorb a wide range of sources and allowing them to integrate with the artists' reality in the process of original creation.

Finally, they bridge the rift between the sacred and secular experience, by helping to open for one moment a window through which creators, performers and audience members may perceive other levels of their own reality and experience the sacred dimension of the world as it appears to the awakened imagination.

Savannah Tennessee Elaine Walling is the Artistic Director of Vancouver Moving Theatre. This article is adapted from a presentation she made at the fifth annual Women in View Festival, Vancouver.