

# The Downtown Eastside Community Play

by Savannah Walling



Cast and crew. Photo - John Endo Greenaway

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In the fall of 2003, my company, Vancouver Moving Theatre, produced a community play for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Although we've created interdisciplinary and community-related performing arts for over twenty years, this was our first experience creating this type of community play. The responsibilities turned out to be daunting yet inspiring.

Located on a spit of land in Burrard Inlet, the Downtown Eastside is culturally rich and culturally diverse. First Nations people have lived here for over two thousand years. It's been an entry point for immigrants for more than a century. It's the birthplace of the city of Vancouver. For over a hundred years, people have gathered at the Carnegie Building on Hastings and Main to find lost friends, catch up on the news, and connect with the community.

Our Downtown Eastside home is a unique mixed income community of families and singles, housing and industry, shops and parks: distinctive, fluidly shifting, overlapping mini-communities include Gastown, Main and Hastings, Chinatown, and Strathcona. Each street is like walking in a different neighbourhood, filled with people from different walks of life and circumstances. Lots of interesting people doing different things make them interesting blocks to live in. Residents value their heritage and their socio-economic and cultural diversity.

But although it is tremendously strong and united in some ways, the Downtown Eastside is fractured and alienated in others: it's been a divided community whose groups don't readily interact because of mistrust, fear, and indifference that stem from language, cultural, and socio-economic differences. An inner-city location means inner-city problems: hard times, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, and drug dealing, as well as the pressures of gentrification and urban development. Still, after years of struggle — against demolition, incompatible new construction, and being treated as a “dumping ground” for the larger city's social problems — the community survives. We love our neighborhood.

For thirty years, the Downtown Eastside has been home to me and my husband and colleague, Terry Hunter. It's the community that gave birth to our art, to our company and professional practice, and in which we gave birth to our son. Perhaps that's why fate, along with the urging of the Carnegie Community Center, saw to it that we produce this community play for the Downtown Eastside as the culminating event of Carnegie's one-hundredth anniversary celebration.

Carnegie's vision was inspired by a form of community play discovered in Britain in the



Vancouver Moving Theatre's Terry Hunter (Community Play Producer) and Savannah Walling (Community Play Artistic Director)  
Photo: David Cooper

1970's by playwright Ann Jellicoe and brought to Canada by Dale Hamilton. Canadian adaptations of the form have been produced in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and B.C. In this kind of community play, a small core of experienced theatre artists work with community members (as many as want to participate) to create an artistic work of the highest achievable standard to express and celebrate their community—a play for and by the community. The artists are responsible for relating to the whole community, working in partnership with the existing systems, and refraining from taking sides on divisive issues. The artist's job is not tell them what to think, but to listen and learn from the community and look for opportunities for people to create art and get involved—because the more they help, the more interested they are.

We knew the task was too big, the time line too short, and the resources on hand insufficient. But we also knew the Downtown Eastside has tremendous talent. We knew the community's problems have been sensationalized in the Canadian media and its rare gifts ignored. We knew it was our turn to serve to the best of our ability. The vision was inspiring—and terrifying.

The pressures to succeed were immense. As Aboriginal community actor Stephen Lytton said, "[The] production was an enormous task, being where it's coming

from. And the failure of it would have been far more damaging because of where it's come from. It was like carrying the weight of the whole community on your shoulders." <sup>1</sup>

Terry and I live in the Downtown Eastside. We couldn't leave after the play finished. We would have to live with the consequences: if our work fell short, the whole community would pay — not just us. What if our efforts shed an even worse light on the Downtown Eastside and its residents? We needed all the help we could get. It came slowly and in many forms. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, "There was tremendous collective will to make it happen. We were creating something historic that was important to the neighbourhood. It was important to hear a play that was powerful and spoke to the neighbourhood in a truthful voice."

Our community play turned into an epic, year-long event that involved over two thousand volunteers and twenty-five professional artists in every aspect: research and sharing stories; processions and skill building workshops (43 in all); building costumes, puppets, and sets; helping backstage; and performing. The project scale strained our small "mom and pop" company. It strained the play's resources. It strained our marriage. Everyone involved was over-extended and over-worked. There were so

many different responsibilities, from small to enormous, that we often had to remind ourselves we were only creating a play.

Our first responsibility was to make sure that we and our co-producing partner were climbing the same mountain. (It took a month to work out the details.) We agreed to operate according to the purpose and principles outlined by the Carnegie Centre.

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We agreed to celebrate the Downtown Eastside community's past, portray its present in all its variety, and share visions for the future. Focusing on issues the community thinks are important and giving voice to those who live there, we were to build new connections in a shared experience that bridged the neighbourhood's diverse cultural and socio-economic groups. We agreed to hire a culturally diverse team of artists that included women (and East End residents) in leadership positions, to develop capacity in the arts, and to support the community in making art. As part of the larger purpose of improving perceptions about the neighbourhood, we were to get media and the larger community out to the play. We had to fund-raise for the play and keep the project on budget and well managed. We agreed to balance process and product, and leave behind archives of the process, materials, and production

We were also responsible for meeting the Vancouver Moving Theatre's artistic mandate. We set out to create a meaningful, accessible show that engaged people's hearts, minds, and imaginations, and to this end we had to tailor the event for this unique community. Our theatre strives to stimulate new art through the interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange of ideas. Sometimes we put student and community performers onstage with professional performers. And of course we would strive to deliver professional service, quality, and value while working with an attitude of partnership, cooperation, and respect.

The artistic goals of this particular com-



munity play gave rise to further responsibilities. Our task was to write a musical play honouring the people and history, struggles and triumphs, cultures, and art forms of the Downtown Eastside. To this end, we planned to research significant events and experiences via an outreach program that would involve hundreds of people. We would retell stories heard over and over again and make up new stories inspired by real people, and then distill the script to stories of struggle and triumph that insisted on being heard today. We needed to create a script that would remain coherent while incorporating and interweaving as many voices, stories, songs, and perspectives as possible, and build in an unlimited number of characters for up to a hundred actors. We were responsible for assembling a strong team of artists who knew the neighbourhood, were good at what they do, understood and enjoyed a collaborative process, and had experience guiding and enthusing community volunteers — all towards establishing a collaborative process for generating new material, sharing images and ideas, and crystallizing themes. On a more mundane but still challenging level, we had to convert an empty hall into a theatre and clothe over one hundred and ninety characters. And finally, overall, we were responsible for mounting the play effectively and doing our best to provide everyone involved with a positive experience

With regard to our co-workers, Terry and I were responsible for providing an achievable plan of duties with clear priorities and goals, resources to fulfill the tasks, and follow-through on ideas and plans. We were responsible overall to admit to our mistakes and — to the best of our ability — to do no harm. We knew we had to be mindful of the consequences when we were making choices — some could help and some could harm. Decisions needed to fit our intentions, our resources, and our community. We tried to make our choices transparent, to acknowledge all help, to let things happen slowly, and when in doubt to compromise. We knew every person we met had something important to teach.

We also had responsibilities with regard to the neighbourhood. We needed to consult with the community (providing Chinese translation wherever we could) to determine subject matter, themes, music, and presentational styles, and incorporate their feedback to make sure the language

and stories had the ring of truth, were culturally respectful, historically accurate, and honestly portrayed the Downtown Eastside. In all this, we had to honour the neighbourhood's unique social, historical, and physical characteristics; to witness without judgment and respect what it takes to cope and survive in hard times; and to give voice in a non-intrusive way to social issues that come up over and over again. We had, in short, to look at harsh realities without overlooking the “phoenix in the ashes.” Our community needed to see and recognize itself in the play and production.

We also were responsible for hundreds of volunteers. We had to provide a safe and confidential place for sharing stories. We needed to cope respectfully with difficult issues involving security and inclusion-exclusion so we could provide a safe working environment for everyone, ensuring that everyone was treated with respect in every circumstance. We had to provide a fun, friendly, welcoming, and smoothly running environment for rehearsals and building sets and props. We were responsible for providing three months of healthy snacks on a limited budget for an unpredictable number of volunteers (some of them in great need) and bringing in tangible benefits as play resources improved (two cast suppers, four weeks of child care, complementary tickets, and an archival DVD of the show). And after the show, we had to provide transition events to close the circle on the project in a helpful way and ease the inevitable post-production letdown

The hundreds of participants were volunteers. They were unpaid, generously giving of their time and drawing on their courage to move into new territory. As professional artists in a community play, we had to be fully prepared at each rehearsal, support and speak with respect to cast members at every step of the process, and work out differences between members of the artistic team at another time and place.

The responsibilities we faced were large and multi-faceted. From the first day, the idea of a community play evoked both excitement and negativity. We faced distrust (of new money, new faces, and big budget projects) and suspicion (of “poverty pimps” and “make-work” projects). We met tensions (between cultural groups, between neighbourhoods, between “haves” and “have-nots”) and resentment (toward foreign community play models that employ

some and expect others to volunteer). Over the year, we stumbled onto bad memories, bad dreams, and bad feuds. We faced language, literacy, economic and cultural barriers, and issues of food, poverty, legal and illegal drugs, safety, and security. In order to make the play a familiar, welcoming, and intriguing presence in the Downtown Eastside and to build a web of support, we hired an outreach team who lived or worked in the Downtown Eastside's historical neighbourhoods and understood their concerns. We met with people and organizations to learn how we could work with them and what they could bring. We attached play-related events to existing programs and provided excellent and accessible skill-building workshops. In short, we did our best to meet distrust, suspicion, and resentment with respect and patience, and provide a safe and inviting public event where people could socialize and enjoy creative activity.

These responsibilities were enormously challenging. We drew on the experience of over thirty years of professional and community work. We learned on the job. We didn't always succeed. We worked as hard as we could for one year, but nothing we could do was enough — ever. We could have/should have/wanted to have met more people, talked to more people, and involved more people.

We worked too fast. We created a project that normally takes two to three years in just one. We took nine weeks to rehearse the kind of community play that normally takes twelve. Relationships take time to build. Trust takes time to grow. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, “You realized how fragile the thing was and the huge damage if it had failed.”

The experience was not perfect for the participants. Some felt the volunteers should have been paid. As participant coordinator Leith Harris reported, some feelings were hurt and some people got lost along the way. Some people did not like their assigned lines, or did not understand the English, or could not read and were too shy to say. Some people misplaced their schedules or scripts. Some did not have phones and messages went astray. Some did not like the food. Others were disappointed or felt betrayed when a song was cut. Some things went missing. When security and issues of inclusion and exclusion arose, creative, respectful, effective solutions had to be





found.

Nor was the experience perfect for the artists. The artistic team were all over-worked and needed two more weeks of rehearsal and more staff — including a chef! Sometimes people got sick. People didn't always get along. Sometimes they did not have enough resources or experience for the task at hand, or they were not as prepared as they should have been. And sometimes their vision was bigger than the available resources.

People faced family emergencies, plumbing problems, computer crashes, accidents, deaths, robberies, evictions, alcohol and drug issues, mental health and personality issues and many economic barriers. But, as Leith Harris wrote in a poem called “published in the January 15, 2004 issue of *The Carnegie Newsletter*;

The genuine caring  
and generous sharing  
of time, energy and knowledge  
made it all worthwhile and more.  
Plus – THE AUDIENCES LOVED IT!

When serious concerns emerged, cast members brought them to the producer as respectful petitions. Cast and artists were careful to protect the show and the rehearsal process.

Finally the miracle was accomplished: the play went up, sold out seven of eight shows, and earned standing ovations. Everything worked wonderfully well: the lights, costumes, music, choreography and script. The actors portrayed their characters with conviction, spoke with passionate understanding, and formed a strong, supportive team. I was so humbled to be in the presence of such strength and beauty, I cried for an hour after the first night.

The responses to the play, by both those on the stage and those in the audience, illustrate how overwhelming the experience was. “We met the challenge,” stated Stephen Lytton, a community actor, “[W]e, as a people, came together and succeeded in that mandate of building bridges. The sweetest part was that we had worked together.” Mary MacAulay, a Downtown Eastside resident, was full of praise: “*The Downtown Eastside Community Play* was powerful and humbling and magical and educational. Many of our friends, neighbours, and my daughter's classmates were in it and loved it from the inside out. We loved it from the

inside in. We wanted to see it twice, but it was sold out. Bravo!” And Jo Ledingham's review in *The Vancouver Courier* was likewise enthusiastic: “*In the Heart of a City* beats with vitality and hope... These funny and brave performers are proof that the courage and humour that kept Main and Hastings alive and kicking through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is still around” (3 December 2003).

After the run of eight shows was finished, the aftermath arrived. Some cast members felt lost. The artistic team was exhausted. I was burnt out, emptied. Our company had no plans for the future. Who had had time to plan? We didn't know that wrapping up the play would consume one more year.

Big questions arose. When the consequences of failure are so immense, how ethical is it to commit to such an enormous project before you have the resources in place to pull it off? How ethical is it to do a big community arts project without some kind of sustaining follow-up? As organizing committee member Jil P. Weaving asked, “What do you do after the party leaves town and not everybody gets a goody bag?” Who does the follow-up? The artist? The community partners? The funding agencies? The community? But what could we do? Carnegie is a community centre, not an arts producer. The directors of Vancouver Moving Theatre are middle-aged and moving into new phases of personal practice.

This is what we've done. After the play ended, we organized a series of low-key transition events, including a thank-you party, a post-mortem workshop for participants, showings of the archival DVD, and a power-point display on the making of the play. We created an eight-panel display on *The Downtown Eastside Community Play*, which is now on permanent display at the Carnegie Community Centre. Carnegie Community Centre committed to produce a community arts festival, create a five-year community arts business plan, and research the feasibility of setting up an independent nonprofit arts organization within two years. Terry, as the executive director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, advised the community centre on these plans.

Vancouver Moving Theatre co-produced (with the Carnegie Community Centre) *The Heart of the City Festival*, which finished on October 24, 2004. Over four hundred artists (most from the Downtown Eastside) performed in sixty-two events at

over twenty-five locations. This time we paid honorariums to all the artists. Festival events included a panel of community play participants (*The Downtown Eastside Play — One Year Later*), staged readings of three new original plays, and songs by local writers (*Through the People's Voice*), as well as two days of information sharing and skill building workshops for local actors (*Breaking into the Biz Forum*). From January 28 to February 6 this past winter, we associate produced (with NeWorld Theatre and PuSH International Performing Arts Festival) James Fagan Tait's adaptation of the novel *Crime and Punishment*. This project added five performers from the community play to a team of fifteen professional actors. These events are Vancouver Moving Theatre's way of saying “thank you” to the enormously talented community who supported last year's Downtown Eastside community play.

People in the Downtown Eastside are excited about the emerging community of artists and the circle of energy and hope. Community artists are excited about making and presenting all kinds of art and speaking about the community in their own voice. They are looking for training, self-employment — and job opportunities that will allow them to produce their art and live with dignity. Carnegie Community Centre hopes to make arts and culture an integral part of the economic and social renewal of the Downtown Eastside Community.

But what is next? And whose responsibility is it?

Since graduating in anthropology from Stanford University (USA), Savannah Walling has worked as a playwright, director, choreographer, musician, dancer, and educator, touring four continents. She collaborates with artists of many genres, techniques, and traditions to create accessible interdisciplinary theatre influenced by Vancouver's

Pacific Rim culture. As artistic director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, she has created or co-directed over forty productions since 1983. Currently, she is working on *The Shadows Project*.

All quotations unless otherwise noted are from informal interviews and conversations that took place over the course of the project and its aftermath.