

# *Excavating Yesterday*

THE BIRTH, GROWTH, AND EVOLUTION OF A RESIDENT  
ARTIST IN THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE.

*by Savannah Walling with contributions by Terry Hunter*



*All things however they flourish  
Turn and go home to the root  
From which they sprang*

- TAO TE CHING



Sifting through shifting landscapes of memory, I unearth evidence of our journey—shards of creation, ancestral and artistic trace-lines, social and political forces...Terry's farm-instructing, music theatre-loving grandparents who worked alongside residents of the Saskatchewan Red Pheasant Reserve... My Oklahoma grandparents who farmed next door to Comanche neighbours...Whispers of civil wars, massacres, family feuds, addiction, and interracial marriage. Growing up under a nuclear cloud on a continent shaped and influenced by Aboriginal ideas and a host of cultural influences, we inherited from our ancestors a profound belief in the golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The narrative of our history emerges out of all of these intersections with the community in which we've been planted for thirty years—a spit of land on Burrard Inlet known as the Downtown Eastside

The tipping point of this history was our 1973 move into this, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood—and most misunderstood. Its historic borders were the waters of Burrard Inlet on the north, tidal streams flowing through gullies east and west (today's Campbell and Carrall streets), and the tidal flats of False Creek on the south. Overlapping mini-communities of Gastown, Main and Hastings corridors, Chinatown, North of Hastings (Japantown), and Strathcona rest on unceded Coast Salish territory. This is the place that gave birth to our company, Vancouver Moving Theatre, and its interdisciplinary and community-engaged art practice.

Shift forward thirty years to the critical tipping point that moved us onto an entirely new level of engagement with the Downtown Eastside. In 2002, all of our experiences of the previous thirty years—and our history of living and working in this place—led to an invitation from the Carnegie Community Centre to partner to produce a community play for, with, and about the Downtown Eastside: one that would celebrate its struggles and triumphs in a process that built bridges between groups within the community. As artists within our community, we would become truly artists *of* the community.

So how did we get from there to here?

When Terry and I arrived in the Downtown Eastside back in the early 1970s, we encountered a very different world than it is today. Back then we saw a residential community with a dynamic retail strip centered around Woodward's retail and grocery store, lots of mom and pop stores serving the mostly low-income locals, and long-standing cultural centres. No visible homeless were evident, nor were illegal drugs used openly on the streets—in fact, locals were concerned about bars over-serving beer to their patrons.

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Our arrival coincided with a whole slew of local victories, in particular, the defeat of a plan to wipe out the neighbourhood with an eight-lane freeway. This victory changed national housing policy, turned around years of civic neglect, and resulted in innovative social and cooperative housing and new, revitalized community and cultural centres. But we didn't know any of these stories when we arrived. We only knew we had found an affordable home and rehearsal space, a community that welcomed and respected diversity, and a steaming stew of cultural aromas.

Ancestors of today's Coast Salish people have used this spit of land for thousands of years. There's still a strong First Nations presence here; the Downtown Eastside is called the largest urban reserve in Canada. It's also home to North America's second largest historical Chinatown. Almost half of the area's population is a visible minority, and it's been home to cultural festivals, feasts, celebrations, and ceremonies—Chinese New Year's Parades, Japanese Bon dances, taiko drumming, rhythm and blues, gospel, and Coast Salish, pan-Indian, and Ukrainian cultural events.

The seeds of our artistic practice were planted in this stew: our fascination with interdisciplinary creation; our commitment to bridging barriers between cultures; our desire to connect artistic practice with community. Our home community in turn shaped our practice and who we are. Witnessing the annual return of Chinese Lion Dancers on the streets of Chinatown, for instance—who arrived to bring blessings to the

community and frighten away evil forces—inspired us to take our work into the streets.

When Terry and I began our lifelong partnership, our shared love of music and dancing set in motion a long line of collaborative interdisciplinary explorations in companies we co-founded: two years of the Mime Caravan (with Doug Vernon); seven years of Terminal City Dance (with Karen Jamieson and others) and over twenty-five years of Vancouver Moving Theatre. From day one, we strove to break down boundaries between music, dance and theatre; bridge artistic disciplines and cultural traditions; create accessible art; step through imaginary fourth walls to interact directly with spectators and communities; take theatre out of the studio and into the streets and community; participate in places of celebration where people gather in a spirit of peace and hope for the future.

Blown north to Vancouver's inner city by the winds of the Vietnam War, I blended personal passions with local inspiration. I researched Asian practices of combining dance, live music, and mask with European popular theatre practices (from masques, mumming, and Commedia Dell'Arte to seventeenth-century fool literature). Inspired by Korean and taiko drum dancing and studies in Afro-Caribbean percussion, Terry developed his own style of drumming and moving at the same time. Out of these fusions emerged productions we toured around the world.

"Drum Mother," an audience-interactive character who danced and played music on large drums built into her red hoop-skirt, was launched at the Chinatown New Year's Parade. She then led 30,000 people in the 1984 Vancouver Peace March, before touring across Canada with the Festival Characters.

*Samarambi: Pounding of the Heart*, a non-verbal street drama that enacted a ceremony of conflict and resolution between forces dangerously out of balance, premiered during a six-month residency at Expo 86 on the fringes of Chinatown. We incorporated space for audience-interactive improvisations into the tightly composed structure performed by masked archetypal characters—two danced on stilts, one utilized extra vocal techniques on a portable sound-system built into her costume, and all performed live music.



Three blocks from our home—in tandem with drum dance training we provided for dance students in the Main Dance performance training program—we created "Blood Music." The choreography of this drum dance, which premiered in Korea, was inspired by the very simple rhythms of life without which we would all die: our hearts beating and pumping waves of blood, our lungs breathing, and the ebb and flow of the sea.

Combining research on the physics of sound with long-standing interest in Asian performance forms, we developed an introduction to drum dancing—a global approach to performer training in which physical, musical, mental, and spiritual exercises cultivate total presence, impelling participants beyond their preconceived limitations. In these workshops for young and old, we applied equal attention to process and product to create warm, supportive atmospheres—an important building block for the community-engaged projects in our future.

All these creations grew out of the soil of the Downtown Eastside, were shaped by its cultural winds, and shared locally before taking off around the world. For fifteen years, we continuously departed from this neighbourhood to tour Canada and the world. Along the way—earning a living by the skin of our teeth—we learned our craft as artist-producer-performers and worked with a series of ensembles.

Our work was originally funded as a dance company, but as it began to develop, Canada Council dance juries could not see enough of the dance component and cut us off (1984). We supported ourselves touring BC schools and international festivals. For a brief renaissance, we—and a few other companies who didn't fit the disciplinary corrals—were jointly funded in a special initiative supported by the Dance and Theatre Offices of the Canada Council (1989-1991).

This enabled us to develop *The House of Memory* for the small city of Nelson, our first community residency prototype combining performance, teaching, and community feeling. We brought an original script to the community with "baskets" for local participation and provided two weeks of skill-building workshops for fifty community members, young and old, who were integrated into a production featuring archetypal characters, stilt and drum dancing, and clowning.

By the early 1990s, we'd been off on tours for so long that we'd fallen "off the radar." Most of our Vancouver peers and home community didn't know what we did. The funding scene was changing. As interdisciplinary artists, we were never easy to assess—dancers called us actors and actors considered us dancers. Arts funding was shrinking as the federal government's debt load soared, so disciplinary camps were "circling their wagons." We didn't fit established categories. By 1991, Canada Council's Dance and Theatre Section's joint support for interdisciplinary companies was drying up (and soon discontinued); so did support for national touring ensembles of physical theatre, dance, and mime. The City of Vancouver discontinued support towards the touring activities of local companies. We could no longer afford to maintain and train a year-round ensemble.

Like peers across Canada, we developed new survival strategies, turning to one-man shows and projects. Partnerships allowed us to pursue cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and inter-provincial collaborations, such as *The Good Person of Setzuan* (staged in parks with Ruby Slippers and Touchstone Theatre), *Tales from the Ramayana* (with Mandala Arts), and *Luigi's Kitchen* (with Alberta's Trickster Theatre)—all rehearsed and/or performed in Vancouver's East End.

Over the course of our art-making journeys on the margins, we encountered criticism from a variety of directions. Some of it made sense; we agreed with it. But sometimes we were mystified. Slowly we realized that redefining the arts is a political act: we can measure the strength of our visions by the strength of the resistance we arouse. We stumbled into high art taboos against popular entertainment; assumptions that accessible art is second class fare for second class minds; biases that expensive concert venues determine artistic worth; fears that collaborative script development dilutes artistic standards. We encountered distrust of the human capacity to

think and create in images; devaluation of ancient art forms in favour of fast, new, disposable art; bias against non-linear narrative structures. The act of naming forces that devalued us and our practice was empowering.

Because we didn't fit into other categories, we've carved out our own identity, located artistic ancestors, and educated bookers and audiences. Like other artists on the margins, we've wrestled with "soft" censorship imposed by governmental, marketing, and corporate forces who decide which images, stories, and ideas deserve support.

Labelling, censoring, dismissing, dividing, and erasing—these are deadly techniques to silence our voices and paralyze our courage.

During these challenging transition years, our home community was transforming. During the 1980s, over a thousand SRO hotel rooms were converted as landlords geared up for Expo 86. In Expo's aftermath, our community gained a reputation as Canada's poorest urban postal code. During the 1990s, Woodward's—the main social and shopping area—closed. Globalization of the illegal and legal drug trades, downsizing of the mental hospitals, the loss of resource industry jobs, cuts in corporate taxes, offshoring work to third world countries,

welfare reduction policies, loss of affordable housing—all of these correlated with the emergence of visible and extreme poverty, a swelling survival sex trade, addiction and property crime, and a new open-air drive-by drug market.

Our Downtown Eastside home continues to be a vital, functioning, culturally and socially diverse, stable neighbourhood. Unlike the media portrayal, most of its 16,000 residents are hardworking and honest, struggling to survive with dignity. But we face the same huge problems faced by inner city and rural communities all over the world. Residents are displaced as the gap increases



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between rich and poor; globalization moves jobs and resources from our home communities and fractures local connections; rapid gentrification and externally imposed development threaten the distinctive heritage, character and scale of communities.

As our six-year-old son's passion for history led to homeschooling, a new "apprenticeship" began: learning to listen, to be life-long learners, to guide while being led. During our years of raising Montana Blu in this neighbourhood, we looked for opportunities to nourish local connections and plant deeper roots. Terry started a percussion ensemble for local kids and a community marimba ensemble. We taught drum dancing every season at Main Dance school down the street. We volunteered to perform in local events. Finally, in 1999, we initiated the Strathcona Artist at Home Festival. This festival opened a huge and very rich vein: the history, culture, struggles, and story of the Downtown Eastside, Vancouver's original townsite. The more we learned, the more we participated in local events, the more involved, connected, and committed we became.

The Downtown Eastside is our home. We live here because we like our neighbours' compassion, courage, and diversity and the neighbourhood's values, history, art forms, and cultures; its human scale and character; the physical beauty of its buildings and bits of green space. To build healthy communities, we're all needed. Over the last ten years, Terry and I have taken small steps we know how to take—creating art that excites us, involves and engages people from our community, and challenges negative stereotypes. We learn about the neighborhood and share what we learn.

In contrast to community-engaged artists who view themselves as social engineers working to create a more perfect society, I see myself as joining other Downtown Eastside gardeners to cultivate a healthy garden that grows a variety of healthy plants. I do it through art because I'm an artist. Because of my family's history of civil war and internal feuds, my childhood exposure to racist and Communist-phobic values, my dislike

of coercive child-rearing techniques, I distrust goals to manipulate or change other people for "their own good"—no matter how praiseworthy the intentions. I believe the roots of hatred, poisonous pedagogy, and totalitarianism are firmly planted in the soil of coercion. For me, it's a big enough task to respect, take seriously, listen to, and do my best to support those with whom I live and work, regardless of their background and skill level.

And so in 2002 came the invitation to celebrate our community—in partnership with Carnegie Community Centre—through a Downtown Eastside community play. This was a project on a scale far larger than any we had ever undertaken. Although we'd produced many interdisciplinary shows, a neighbourhood mini-festival, and small scale educational and community residencies, this would be our first experience of creating a play with community input from start to finish, and which would be performed by as many people as cared to participate.

We knew we had experience organizing complex, multilayered collaborations with co-producing partners. We knew our home community has tremendous talent. We knew the community's challenges have been sensationalized in the media and its great gifts ignored. We also knew the task was too big, the time line too short, the resources in place insufficient and we would have to "learn on the job."

But the wealth of our shared history within and with the community overcame these doubts. As Downtown Eastside gardeners of the arts, we stepped forward to embrace the opportunity to cultivate and nourish, to give back to our community. Our decision to accept this invitation came down to this: we owed the Downtown Eastside community a huge debt of gratitude. It was our turn to serve to the best of our ability.

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