

New Conversations
A report on the
New Directions Community Play Symposium
Vancouver
April, 2008



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New Directions Symposium Rapporteur
October, 2008
(Photos by Terry Hunter, unless otherwise noted.)

Sunday afternoon, April 27th, 2008

I arrive at the door of the Russian Hall with what I assume will be plenty of time to pick up tickets to see the Downtown East Side Romeo and Juliet, a final night performance which will kick off the New Directions Symposium. I have spent the previous 45 or so minutes sitting on a nearby lawn, shaded from an untypically hot Vancouver sun by a typically West Coast flowering tree, and catching up with a community play compatriot. Our chat dealt not at all with any specifics of community play production, yet our shared experience in this particular form is a touchstone -- is what has continued to keep us erratically in touch. I am pleased to be in Vancouver, pleased to be reuniting with long-time colleagues and friends. I am equally pleased that we will be opening up our discussions to include others whose engaged art practices I know of only slightly, or not at all.

Inside we discover that the Russian Hall is packed with excited audience members. I feel anticipatory and familiar pleasure at the prospect of a performance witnessed with the temporary community that is this audience. Audiences for community-engaged shows have always felt more alive to me, more responsive. I see another colleague across the room. She is with someone I haven't met, and don't recognize. I stand and try to catch my friend's attention as the houselights begin to fade. Her unknown companion sees me, and waves back.

Introduction

In April, 2008, Vancouver Moving Theatre (VMT) hosted *New Directions*, the IVth National Community Play Exchange Symposium.

The idea for a series of community play symposia first germinated in 2003 in Vancouver, when a group of artists from across Canada gathered to see the VMT production of *In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play*. In early 2004 these artists found themselves together again to participate in the *Documenting Engagement Institute*,ⁱ a project of the Pacific Cinematheque and the Roundhouse Community Centre.

These informal encounters sparked a strong desire among practitioners of the collaborative community play – a form introduced to Canada in 1990 by Ontario playwright Dale Hamilton and England's Colway Theatre Trust – to continue to convene in order to share our work, engage in discussion of common issues, for mutual support and inspiration, and toward exchanges of ideas and skills.

Community engaged theatre artists are working in more diverse forms and models than the model of Community Plays as they came from England about two decades ago. The new models emerging in Canada are innovative, fresh, cutting edge and very importantly, designed to be sustainable in the community from year to year. The circus isn't leaving town, but staying.
-- Terry Hunter, Executive Director, Vancouver Moving Theatre

Each of these successive gatherings has focused on particular themes and/or a common concern. The goals of *New Directions* in 2008, as articulated by VMT Executive Director Terry Hunter and Artistic Director Savannah Walling, were “to explore new styles of collaborative community play building, honour the legacy, examine logistics of interdisciplinary creation, and build new local provincial and national connections among Canadian community play



Visiting and local presenters at the New Directions Symposium. Left to right: Judith Marcuse, Rachael Van Fossen, Cathy Stubington, Dale Hamilton, Ruth Howard, Elaine Carol, Laurie McGauley, Lina de Guevara, Jill P. Weaving (moderator)

artists.”ⁱⁱ The 2008 *New Directions* symposium invited a number of Vancouver-based artists and educators whose community-engaged theatre work does not depart from the Colway model.

This fourth symposium came at a ripe and ready time to engage in new conversations -- to become excited about potential new collaborations -- but also to wrestle with familiar and unfamiliar tensions we encountered as a result. Where and how will we begin to introduce and address questions raised at our previous gatherings?

How can senior community engaged artists and educators work with student and emerging artists to nurture the future development of community art practice, to develop diversity in the field, and to develop new voices? What can educational institutes bring to the community art field, and what can community-engaged artists bring to the educational institutes? How can the artists survive long enough to become mentors? -- Savannah Walling, Artistic Director, Vancouver Moving Theatre

Sunday evening

The reception that follows the final performance of Vancouver Moving Theatre’s Downtown EastSide Romeo and Juliet is both a closing party for cast and crew, and an opening ‘Meet and Greet’ for the symposium. I hope the R and J people feel properly fêted by those of us who are busy reuniting from across the country. All of us seem to be ‘abuzz’ with excitement at the performance we have just seen. The show has displayed strong mastery of performance skills and an imaginative and highly theatrical staging, without losing what is, for me, the strongest aspect of a community-engaged theatre aesthetic: the direct and acknowledged connection of performers to material. There is nothing like that feeling that comes from knowing that the people performing really care about, and are implicated in, the issues a piece addresses.

Methodology of this report

I have been charged with the role of symposium ‘rapporteur.’ I bring to this task the perspective of one who self-identifies as an artist-academic of community-based performance: an individual who continues to actively undertake creative projects in collaboration with variously defined communities, but who more regularly these days engages with students studying principles, strategies, tools, techniques, and ethical questions raised in community arts practices. As per the mandate entrusted to me by Vancouver Moving Theatre, this report is intended to provide a synthesis of activities and ideas from the *New Directions* symposium.

I attended all scheduled symposium sessions wearing both my hats as participant and rapporteur. I took notes and audio documented most of the sessions. My report is equally informed by unscheduled discussions with others pre-, post-, and during the gathering itself. VMT has provided me with written participant evaluations when an individual granted permission, as well as other material directly relevant to the symposium. Shortly after the symposium, I sent out to all participants a simple questionnaire seeking “quotable quotes.” In this way I hoped to include more multiplicity of voices, and to address more complexity -- in other words to better reflect the richness of the symposium itself.

My utopian vision is about a time when art for social change work is highly valued both within the world of art and culture, and in many other sectors of our society. -- Judith Marcuse, Co-Director, International Centre of Art for Social Change

Nonetheless, to a large extent this report is a personal rumination, and, I hope, transparently so. Just as one of the issues community-based artists face in their work is the risk of essentialized perceptions of particular neighbourhoods or groups, with this report I do not wish to pretend to provide objective documentation, or authoritative analysis. I have picked up on threads that piqued my interest, and have loosely woven these together here, in a document that I hope will also be of interest to others.

Monday morning, over coffee

I am having coffee with two community play colleagues at a B & B near Commercial Drive. We are discussing how to represent our work at the public forum on the final day of the symposium. How much do people who have not attended previous symposia need to know as background -- or is it okay to start with the here and now? Can we Colway-influenced types be continuing the conversations launched at previous symposia, or do we need to re-state ground we have already covered, such as the foundational principles of our community play practices?

If the conditions are not too hostile, the opportunity for artistic growth in everyone is possible -- Cathy Stubington, Artistic Director, Runaway Moon Theatre

A note about the style of this report

As community-engaged theatre artists our work is inherently interdisciplinary, crossing back and forth freely through discourses delineating what is art, what is social action, what is community development, what is life and what is fiction, what is process and what is product, and so on. In keeping with this blurring of strictly disciplinary concerns, this report takes the form of inter-related texts: 1. In italics, my personal and highly subjective after-the-fact journaling of key moments, conversations and thoughts, pre- during, and post-symposium; 2. The body of the text, examining some of the issues and concerns raised during the symposium (which also represents my subjective point of view); 3. Selected contrasting or supporting quotations from symposium participants, which I see as being in conversation with these other two texts.

A bit of a disclaimer...

I have struggled with how best to approach this report: my first inclination, these days, is to write from a critical perspective that looks closely at issues in community-engaged work, and to consider these drawing upon current thinking in appropriate theoretical discourses. There is also however an oft-repeated need, emphasized strongly during the course of this and previous symposia, to simply document the history of collaborative community plays in Canada, and to track in what ways these practices are evolving in – yes – New Directions.

With this report I do not claim to provide exhaustive analysis – in any case time and considerations of length preclude doing so. I do offer some of my own thoughts on concerns raised, and make occasional reference to a growing body of published writing in community arts and community-engaged performance. But for the most part I have tried, for the record, to simply tell a little bit of the story of the collaborative community plays in Canada, and of the symposium as I experienced it. Despite the emphasis here on the particular form of the community play, the symposium marked an ‘opening up’ of our network, our collaborations, and our thinking about new directions. I do make some links to practices of other artists attending the symposium. Many of our concerns and preoccupations are the same.

We want to reach a mainstream audience without compromising radicalism. That's one reason why we work so hard to make good theatre, to get those other people in. And I do not want to see community engaged work written out of history the way queer women performance artists have been written out of history. -- Elaine Carol. Artistic Director. Miscellaneous Productions

In Enderby we are developing a relationship with a village in Kenya. How do you do a community arts project with two communities across the world that is not internet based and that is not one hundred airplane tickets based?
-- Cathy Stubington

Wednesday evening -- "Thought for Food"

The closing of the symposium is the least formal of all the scheduled sessions. In a spacious hall that is both a café and a yoga centre, we first mingle over drinks, and then sit to eat together at a long table. The food Radha Eatery provides is excellent. But we have also given ourselves much to chew on, until our next gathering.

My community is characterized by rootlessness, lost language, and far away family connections. In a way it is not a community. Like the community at this conference, it is a community of situation. -- Lina de Guevara, Artistic Director, Puente Theatre

Community Play Exchange Symposia I, II, and III

Earlier symposia limited invitations to attend to fairly strict consideration of practitioners working in the collaborative community play form; exceptions were based on known colleagues with whom organizers deemed we shared common language and priorities to focus discussion of our issues. These Community Play Exchange symposia were also scheduled to coincide with performances which, while highly adapted, were also still recognizably based on the original Colway model. In spring 2004, we saw Jumblies Theatre's *Once A Shoreline*, produced in collaboration with the Davenport Perth Neighbourhood Centre in Toronto. In the fall of the same year a gathering was organized around the Guelph Community Play, entitled *All Over the Map*. In 2007, a symposium coincided with the closing performance of *Bridge of One Hair*, produced out of a three-year Jumblies Theatre residency in Etobicoke.

The first National Community Play Exchange Symposium (Toronto, Spring 2004) examined the common threads and formative features that had captivated and influenced those attending from the first Canadian community plays and their antecedents. The second Symposium (Guelph, Fall 2004) explored themes of community engagement and activism in relation to the Community Play model, and took a critical look at the complexities and ever-changing relationships between professionals and non-professionals in collaborative community arts. The third Symposium (Toronto, Spring 2007), examined permutations and departures from the initiating community play model; catching up on where our work has led us in the interim; discussing training and mentoring; and sharing new ideas, operating strategies and projects to sustain and nurture what we feel is important." --- *From the document 'Backgrounder for Presenters and Guests,' provided by VMT prior to the New Directions symposium.*

*It really strikes me that the community play form hasn't caught on as a movement in the same way it has in the U.K. - that is, its ramifications have been diversified, rather than promoting a replication of the form – beyond our handful of original Canadian producers. Is it something to do with a different country, different times, or different artists? All of us want to move on to other forms – more interdisciplinary, less expensive and exhausting. As a result the younger artists are being inspired by these new impulses, rather than by the original CP form. And it's hard to pick up on it without having experienced -- probably true of most art forms, but this one especially.
-- Ruth Howard, Artistic Director, Jumblies Theatre*

In 2008 the *New Directions* Community Play Exchange Symposium, began, appropriately, with the final performance of a production collaboratively created by a community ensemble. *The Downtown East Side Romeo and Juliet* represented the most recent component of follow-up activities to the DTES 2003 large-scale, collaborative community play *In the Heart of a City*.

How about a community play that only concerns itself with telling a good story and entertaining the folks, as opposed to one that is issue driven? I think people in a community coming together and making a play is enough. People get to know each other, make friendships, become aware of their shared history, problems, concerns of their neighbours, build trust, acceptance, etc. It's a life-affirming endeavour. -- Patrick Foley, DTES Community Writer and Community Rapporteur

Tuesday morning “Liberatory laughter” or, “Unexpected the unsuspecting.”

Appropriate to a forward-looking mandate, the IVth Canadian Community Play Exchange brought innovations to the established symposium format, including the introduction of active skills-building morning workshops.

On Tuesday morning Gina Bastone launches her comic acting workshop with a question: “What is the difference between a clown and a stand-up comedian?” Her Answer: “Clowns don't say funny things. They say things funny.”

*I have been looking forward to this workshop. Gina's clownish direction of the DTES *Romeo and Juliet* was remarkable. The performances were captivating. Characterisations had clearly been built from what each performer brought of themselves to their roles. The script was developed collaboratively both in the rehearsal hall and from written contributions by team members. I arrive at the workshop excited to learn from Gina, and from watching others learn from Gina.*

Following a brief warmup, the morning is devoted to group and individual improvisations. Gina coaches us:

- *“The backstage is alive, keep it alive.”*
- *“This exercise is about stealing focus. Stealing focus is the opposite of sharing focus. Don't be afraid of it, use it!”*
- *To one of the men, in an individual improv: “Come back on again, only this time come out as the best-looking guy in the world. Even if*

we look at your hands we get horny. Oh yeh, and good guys are usually pretty happy guys, too.” On re-entrance, a transformation: from glum, Eeyore-like, unfunny clown to wildly eccentric exhibitionist. Laughter wells up from deep and low in my gut, and rolls out tears from my eyes.

Community theatre reminds us who we are. -- Dalannah Gail Bowen, DTES Community Play Participant

Who knew we were so funny, this symposium crowd? Mostly we have behaved like a bunch of talking heads around tables. Or talking heads at podiums. Talking heads flipping flip chart paper. Talking heads introducing ourselves in a circle.

Something I (re)learned from this workshop: we community engaged practitioners or lead artists or producers or facilitators or difficultators – whatever name we may choose from among on any given day – we community arts animators need to play together more. And I don’t mean – necessarily - theatre games.

I think we are the most burnt of any artists. We’re the most evolved but the most burnt, because of our commitment to the people we work with, but also by the level of bureaucracy we are dealing with. It’s insane. I have 14 different funders for one project, and I don’t have a General Manager because there’s no funding for administration. -- Elaine Carol

Something else I (re)learned from this workshop: self-care, for me, involves making sure I am a student at least as often as I am a teacher.

If I am going to teach community arts, then community arts have to be happening around me. But just keeping my company alive has become a focus. I am trying to develop a succession plan, but I am doing all these admin grants so I can hand the work over to people who want jobs, as opposed to feeling the urgency to tell these stories. -- Laurie McGauley, Co-founder, Myths and Mirrors Community Arts

Lineage of the collaborative community play in Canada

The form that some of us have come to call the ‘collaborative community play’ emerged in the 1970’s in England through the artistic leadership of playwright Ann Jellicoe at the Colway Theatre Trust. In her words, Jellicoe ‘discovered’ⁱⁱⁱ a particular process of community-based theatre production that was impressively large-scale and long in its development period. Jon Oram, the Colway’s second artistic director, continued this work, refined the particular aesthetic that had developed with it, and contributed his own ideas about how to frame discussion of community play principles, priorities and techniques.^{iv}

Playwright Dale Hamilton introduced the Colway-style community play to Canada in 1990 when she invited Oram to guide the process and direct the production of her play *The Spirit of Shivarée* in her birth community of Eramosa Township, Ontario. Ruth Howard, now recognized widely for her work as the founder and artistic director of Jumblies Theatre, accepted a contract to design costumes for Shivarée. I heard about the project through Ruth, and sweet-talked my way into a position as assistant director. What I and others discovered was a form of theatre that was exciting to both artist and activist sensibilities. Literally hundreds of people worked together to create a large-scale outdoor performance that dealt with pressing concerns of the local community.



Savannah Walling speaking at the final symposium session. jil p. weaving in background

Tuesday afternoon -- “Current Questions / Future Directions”

“Once you’ve done one of the large, Colway-style community plays, then everything else gets compared to that.”

This statement was made during the symposium session entitled Future Directions, which took the form of a roundtable.

I recognize the feeling. But it is usually a critique I have leveled at myself. I am thinking, “Sometimes, we are so hard on ourselves.”

Certainly several of us can attest that the collaborative community plays in Canada have been remarkable for their social and their artistic impacts. But others at this roundtable do not, have not and very likely will not work in this specific form, and their practices provide other ‘ways at’ creating art and creating social change. A great diversity of practice is represented at this symposium.

Among the group as a whole clearly we do have shared concerns, many of which surface during this discussion. We all desire to contribute to our communities -- however differently we may define or delineate what communities we “belong” to, and however differently we may characterize our contributions (where some claim the territory of activism, others would not themselves describe their work using the language of social justice.)

There are a lot of young artists out there who are hungry for political and social engagement. I also see that there a lot of academics hungry for this kind of work. -- Judith Marcuse

Our conversation is wide-ranging, with many different threads that make up a loose, messy, but warm fabric of connection among us. Expertly facilitated -- thank you jil p. weaving. As the session proceeds, I think: These are not talking heads. These are thinking heads. Talking heads speak in a vacuum, whereas thinking heads are also listening, attentive and engaged with others.

I recognize myself again when someone else speaks, saying, "I bore easily, so I try to keep doing different things."

Formulas do not make art. Do they? And as Paolo Freire has taught us, neither do formulas make for ongoing social change."

After twenty-five years of doing the same event, it is really liberating to realize "I don't have to do that any more. -- Dan Vie, Founder of the Carnival Clown Band, The Community Arts Workshop Society, and The Fools Society

Artists at the table express a need to avoid repeating themselves, whether artistically, or in the ways they conceive of making change, or in how they contribute to their communities. Many wish to work on a smaller scale. Working on a smaller scale is more sustainable for an individual artist's practice, and also means that the relationships we form with people can be all the more profound. These are, after all, what we have learned to describe as 'relational' practices. And for those who are not 'nomadic' community-engaged artists, but who continue to create work in and with communities they self-identify as belonging to -- well, isn't it ridiculous to even consider doing large-scale ccp's year after year? Change calls for new directions.

And yet, as someone pointedly asks: "Will anyone else take this community play model and run with it?" She's right, of course, to ask. I think all of us would like to see the form continue to prosper -- but who will take it on? The projects are, perhaps, intimidatingly large scale. I don't know that I would have attempted to take my first play on, had I not experienced first-hand how to build one. The projects are big burnouts. The projects are huge -- yes -- but are also hugely satisfying.

So, were the Canadian plays a blip -- or a splash with ripples -- rather than a "movement"? Or a creature that failed to reproduce it self before rapidly mutating? Does it matter? No... and yes... Only that it is a form with such aesthetic and social power, and it's a pity that younger artists might only know about it second hand. Although I, too, am drawn to new approaches, I haven't seen anything else quite to touch it, and don't entirely expect to find it. -- Ruth Howard

I would really hate to see the form disappear. Even though I had to significantly adapt the model when I worked with a community of immigrant women for Sisters/Strangers, the community play was an incredibly important example and process for me to work from. -- Lina deGuevara

In Pam Hall's presentation at the Live in Public conference, she raised questions about how, as responsibly engaged artists developing work in collaboration, our sense of ethics may mean that we pay more attention to mitigating potential risks to others, without sufficient consideration of risks to ourselves. One of these, she points out, is the risk of losing the sense of joy that is so vital to our work.^{vi}

Art forms evolve and change, as do the artists. I am not sure it is possible to remain socially engaged with the work, if we are not engaged artistically. The reverse is probably equally true.

Perhaps we can pass on to others the principles, values, and some of the key processes and practices that remain central and important to us from the ccp? Is this enough?

Defining Features of the Collaborative Community Play

At the first Community Play Exchange in 2004 participating artists reiterated and further articulated defining features and guiding principles attached to the Colway model. We then used this 'list' to launch discussion about which remained central to our work, which we had significantly adapted, which were expendable, and how the form had itself evolved in the practices of Canadian artists.

*It is not a perfect art form. There are bumps and bruises as well as miracles.
-- Savannah Walling*

The Colway model as we first learned it in 1990 taught the following as fundamental and, taken as a whole, distinguishing features:

- A geographically defined community.
- A core paid professional team who take up residence in the community for extended periods of time.
- A volunteer steering team made up of community members.
- Conceptually, a collaborative relationship between paid artists and community volunteers.
- A long development period of up to 2 years.
- A large cast – anywhere from 50 to nearly 200 people.
- Many more involved in other areas of development, design and production.
- An original script based in research, often incorporating stagings of actual historical and/or current events as part of the narrative.

- 'Extreme' Inclusiveness: anyone and everyone who wishes to take part, in any area and without regard to natural talent or level of experience, are invited to participate.
- Writing and directing techniques, and reliance on popular performance forms, that allow for such broad inclusion.
- Inter-generational participation.
- A variety of community events that take place leading up to production, and that relate thematically to the project.
- A balance of process and product, aiming for high standards in writing, direction, acting, design conception, and production values.

In addition to the principles listed above, the Colway had developed clear processes and timelines for developing and producing a community play.

From that first introduction to Canada of the Colway form, influences and inspiration rippled across the country. In Saskatchewan, the 1992 Calling Lakes Community Play production *Ka'ma'mo' pi cik/ The Gathering* led to the formation of Common Weal, now one of regrettably few established organizations in the community arts field. Drawing upon the model of *The Gathering*, the Enderby and District Community Play *Not the Way I Heard It* also successfully built bridges between historically estranged First Nations and white communities in the area. Excitement about the Enderby play brought the community play form to the Downtown East Side in Vancouver. In the meantime, Ruth Howard formed Jumblies Theatre in Toronto, whose several community play productions have mentored younger community-based artists in the form over a long term.

Collaborative community plays in Canada are having a profound impact in community. The benefits they bring to community are enormous. The Downtown Eastside community, for just one example, has embraced community art as a tool for community led development, visioning, bridge building and healing. -- Terry Hunter

Canadian adaptations of the form have been produced in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Yet the artists who choose to self-identify as Colway-influenced practitioners remain only a handful. And invariably, at least one aspect of the original Colway 'formula' is either adapted or abandoned. Where for some the steering team remains crucial to development of a project, Jumblies Theatre engages in successful, highly participatory community consultations using a variety of other strategies such as organizational partnerships. So at what point does a project cease to be a 'pure' community play, and become (in Ruth Howard's words) a "community-playish new direction?"

I like to include professional actors and performers, which was a 'no-no' in the British model. -- Ruth Howard

In a short essay co-written following the first symposium in 2004, Ruth Howard and I examined three principles that had clearly remained important to all artists in attendance: the notion of inclusiveness; the balancing act of maintaining integrity in process and artistic excellence in product; and “the conception of the artist at the centre of this process, rather than at the side saying, ‘I’m facilitating everybody else here.’”^{vii} Continuing a major discussion thread running through that first symposium, we examined how these three principles influence production aesthetic. Since then I have begun to formulate a theory that the power of this aesthetic experience for audiences resides at least partly, if somewhat paradoxically, in the uneven apprehension of technique among participants, in what is nonetheless a strong and bold artistic container (the ‘product’.) It is in the ‘imperfections’ of the work – imperfect if considered in purely classical (dominant) formal terms -- that *life* is discernible in the *art*.^{viii}

Now I go farther than the idea of balancing process and product, and see the whole aesthetic as folding the one into the other as part of what we consider the ‘art.’ -- Ruth Howard

Is it really possible that in 2008, at the New Directions symposium, some of our 2004 preoccupations already seem quaint? The facilitator question, for instance, no longer seems to plague us or cause us angst or make us defensive, even though the requirements of working with volunteers keep us constantly negotiating the territory of an individual artist’s vision in a collaborative process with so-called non-artists.

*In the city you can bring in a director for a weekend workshop, and then bring them in two months later. I can’t do that. It’s an airplane ticket every time. And then when I start to wax artistic about vegetables – that’s another rural-urban divide. The whole rural aesthetic is a different thing.
-- Cathy Stubington*

In the early 1990’s some of us became attracted to the original Colway model because it valued artistic excellence in a way that had not been articulated so clearly for us by other popular or activist theatre practitioners. But no one (this seems so obvious now) aims to create ‘shoddy’ work. Even projects that are not so ‘product’ oriented as the community play, aim to achieve excellence in process. And besides, all of the community-engaged artists here at this most recent symposium create theatre that is art.

Increasingly, then, we are able to find ourselves among peers for whom the whole process-product conundrum is a non-issue.

The need for support

On the other hand, many participants express frustration that community-engaged practices are still in many ways marginalized from the establishment, and that arts funding is inequitably distributed. At each successive community play symposium, and most vociferously here, the need for a community arts service organization comes up. Greater efforts in advocacy are necessary, and strength, visibility and a power base come with numbers. Pockets of community-based artists across the country have few opportunities to know about each others' work, and even fewer to come together for professional exchange.

How do Canadian engaged theatre artists move forward on the national level- to move to another level of cooperation with others? -- Terry Hunter

And at each successive symposium, the same question: "Who has time to devote to pulling together a whole new admin structure?"

While not envisioned to be a service organization per se, the new International Centre of Art for Social Change, whose co-director Judith Marcuse is attending the New Directions symposium, is already contributing significantly to raising the profile of engaged work^{ix}.

Why a cross-Canada collaboration? Why? I need to connect with the First Nations reserve outside Enderby. -- Cathy Stubington

Should anyone decide to take on the massive task of forming a support organization for community arts, the best models to work from are probably not the large, established professional service organizations such as PACT, Equity and PGC. Not only are these groups discipline-specific, they have experienced challenges opening membership up to theatre artists



Judith Marcus presenting at the symposium.

working in unconventional ways (diversity of practice) and to performance forms that emerge from non-Western traditions (cultural diversity.) More recent initiatives such as Performance Creation Canada model a structure that is light on administration, strong in programming and networking, and in which participation is allowed to be fluid, open and evolving. Unlike more rigid membership

associations, this informal networking structure excludes no one who shares goals in common with the group.”^x

A real challenge is to reduce isolation, reduce burnout, and to break out of the silos. -- Judith Marcuse

After the symposium -- a conversation

In a telephone interview following New Directions, a symposium attendee brings up one of the tensions around expanding the symposium circle to include artists whose practices do not spring from the Colway community play tradition. She says, “It was so great before to be such a small, focused group. But how do we stay focused and small and still be inclusive? Who do you exclude? I certainly do not want to be excluded.”

Questions of Inclusion and Exclusion

It is hardly surprising that this question of “who to include” becomes something important to consider when community artists come together for networking and professional development. Community arts are, after all, based in strongly held principles of cultural democracy and social inclusion. Probably none of us could easily be considered ‘exclusive’ or ‘elitist’. Furthermore, and specific to this group, perhaps the most fundamental principle identified as being influential in Canadian adaptations of the Colway model is this notion of ‘extreme inclusiveness’: the idea that anyone who wishes to take part can do so, regardless of previous experience. Certainly it is impossible to ensure that everyone from every sector of a community feels invited and is able to participate. But the goal to extend the invitation as widely as possible, and to facilitate participation (providing childcare, rides to rehearsal, extensive and varied promotion, are some examples) has resulted in projects that are widely intergenerational and intercultural, in which community concerns are examined. One of the very important ways that this form has helped to create such remarkable change in communities is by bringing together people who may otherwise have few chances to meet. To an extent previous symposia limited participation to artists who wished to examine social and artistic implications of working from a principle of extreme inclusiveness.

This inclusiveness is a criterion that has been seminal for me, and which I would like to preserve in any adaptations of this work – in fact, in all my work. The ‘Everyone is Welcome’, its limitations and its social and aesthetic implications – is one of the most exciting and powerful ideas. -- Ruth Howard

The principle of inclusiveness, for the Colway, meant avoiding sensitive or controversial material that might turn some people off participation in the project, in part by basing most of the plays on distant historical events. For Canadian artists inclusion has stretched into practices that attempt to include as many voices and perspectives as possible, and that often deal with current issues.

Several projects in Canada have included stories, verbatim oral histories, and plots or sub-plots situated in the present-day.^{xi}

There have been boundaries limiting inclusiveness in all the projects that I've heard about. Some people were too dangerous to allow to participate; people have been cast according to their abilities and skills; some play projects have allowed more avenues than others for input into script creation; some with more avenues to acting; some with more avenues in design and building; some community actors didn't get the kind of part they hoped and left; some projects made casting choices to consciously encourage multi-cultural participation. --Savannah Walling

At least five of the Canadian community plays have expressly launched with a clearly stated goal to bring people together who have traditionally not had much to do with each other. Both *Ka'mamo'pi cik/The Gathering* (Calling Lakes Community Play, 1992, Saskatchewan) and *Not The Way I Heard It* (Enderby Community Play, 1998, British Columbia) held as a primary goal to build relations between white townspeople and residents of nearby First Nations reserve lands. The Blyth and District Community Play *Many Hands* (1994) wished to ease strained relations among rural farming residents and artsy-fartsy theatre folks who invade each summer for the Blyth Festival season. The goal of *In The Heart of a City* (Downtown East Side Community Play, 2003) was to help nourish existing and help to build new relationships between members of DTES historic cultural communities and mini-neighborhoods. *Shifting Ground/Créons un monde* (2005) sought to increase contact, communication, and cooperation between French- and English-speaking Black Montrealers.

What I do is more an oblique method of social change. Put people together in a room doing papier mâché, and they are going to start talking about whatever is interesting and important to them. -- Cathy Stubington

Yet surprisingly few of the Canadian community play lead artists explicitly frame their work as activism. This tendency may be strategic in some cases, ideological in others. In either case, the effect is the same: community members come to join in the effort who might ordinarily avoid participating publicly in an overtly politicized undertaking. In this way even more divergent perspectives, or simply a wider demographic, can be brought together for dialogue. With the exception of *The Spirit of Shivarée*, which began as Dale Hamilton's activist response to issues of suburban development of rural farmland, project leaders have generally determined overarching themes for the plays through the research process itself. In all cases, including *Shivarée*, the specifics of the content of the play emerge from the community context, in a research process conducted with the community, rather than departing from an existing script.

This insistence on participatory action research, of including community members' input – their voices, stories, and priorities -- in the formulation of a performance is what defines many community arts practices.^{xii} Certainly at this New Directions symposium it is one of the areas common to the practices of most artists attending. It is what Laurie McGauley has characterized as community collaboration, where some other forms may be, as she terms it, 'community-informed.'^{xiii}

The work of Canadian collaborative community play practitioners must constantly negotiate and re-negotiate a foundational ideal of inclusivity. Opening up symposium participation to other artists' processes, priorities and approaches introduced questions inherently relevant to notions of inclusion.

Tools for accomplishing action research is an area where we have much to share. What are the techniques we use to solicit or encourage stories? On what basis do different practitioners make decisions about shaping the material gathered?

Monday afternoon -- “On Tensions, Transformation, and Inclusion.”

“I’ve decided I am not going to do any more of these plays. I am going to get out [of this privileged group] so that others can get in. I don’t need the help, and others on the Downtown East Side do need help, and they’re not getting it.” -- DTES community actor.

“Guilt and shame are useless emotions, so I don’t think we should indulge in them. You should be grateful you were given an opportunity [to take part in the DTES Romeo and Juliet.]” -- response from another DTES community actor.

On the Monday of the symposium a fairly heated exchange follows the afternoon session “DTES Community Participants Speak.” My rapporteur’s notebook in hand, my pen at the ready, I sit up a little straighter. I am thinking to myself, “Now, here are tensions that hold possibility for transformation, for creativity.”

The performance on Sunday confirmed for me the power of authentic performance and the deep connections that can be made between local residents portraying local characters. It was very difficult, then, the next day, as we listened to one cast member describe his feelings of guilt as he walks down Hastings, wishing that everyone could have the opportunities afforded him by the play process, especially given the fact that Vancouver Moving Theatre is deliberately (and I think rightly so) doing smaller plays with bigger, deeper connections.

-- Dale Hamilton, Artistic Director, Everybody’s Theatre Company

The session has run overtime. We disperse before it is possible to delve deeply into exploration and dialogue around the implications of this conflict. Which is not to say that the potential for this moment to transform

us has passed. Quite the opposite: the passion and power of this exchange informed subsequent symposium sessions, and certainly live on in me and others who continue to reflect, now even more deeply, on questions of inclusion/exclusion, and the need to be constantly re-evaluating our work according to changing circumstances.

And speaking of transformation: Earlier in the session we heard inspirational testimonies from individuals involved in VMT and Carnegie Centre performance projects. Personal transformations described are deeply moving, from Dalannah Gail Bowen's recovery from addiction, illness and homelessness, to Gena Thompson's struggles with mental illness, to Sandra Pronteau's refusal to accept dire prognoses from the medical establishment. Each of these speakers links the success of courageous journeys, in no small part, to participation in the supportive, creative, but also challenging environment of the DTES community play.

I don't even recognize the person that was – the person who needed to be supported all the time. But I remember that I cannot expect others to achieve their recovery at the same rate that I did.

-- Gena Thompson, DTES community play participant

Going beyond personal testimony, DTES participants also put forward challenges that lead us away from any possible sense of complacency.

Speaking of inclusion, and accessibility: Stephen Lytton's impassioned call for us to deal more effectively with questions of accessibility insists that theatre groups represented here be leaders in removing barriers to participation from people with disabilities – whether as artists or as audience.

Oh yeh, and that community arts support organization? Would it extend to being an association that could also assist with opportunities for exchange between community play and other project participants?: Gail Bowen asks that we not forget ongoing follow-up for those community play participants "who need a springboard to go to the next level." She asks, why not a website that can link artists and participants nationally? Why not an inter-community exchange, where participants have a chance to travel to Enderby, Victoria, or even Toronto, to meet and see the work of others who have had similar experiences? (As if by magic, at this very session are two people who had participated in the first Canadian community play, The Spirit of Shivaree. On vacation in Vancouver, Ed and Nora had read in the newspaper about the symposium public panel presentations, and surprised all of us by showing up.)

I got involved to do more than just a play. I wanted to communicate to the audience the heart and soul of the community, and the human spirit and its will to survive in all challenges and conditions. -- Stephen Lytton, DTES community play participant

And bringing us back to questions of privilege: community writer Leith Harris comments, “As the cultural community on the Downtown East Side becomes stronger and more closely knit, it can be harder for newcomers to take part. Our cultural projects have kept us off of the street. My questions are: Who are the shows for? How do the projects benefit the most vulnerable?”



Morning workshop with facilitator Mike Stack at the New Directions symposium.

I begin to feel a familiar, anxious fatigue, as I listen to all the expressed needs – and I am not even among the VMT artists who will make hard choices about what needs can be responded to, with scarce resources. Is it possible to avoid seeing these different priorities as competing for attention, and for support? I remind myself that this familiar feeling of anxiety almost invariably provides an opportunity to reconsider the status quo, if I let it. The tensions and one heated exchange do not represent the general tone of the session overall, which was for the most part thoughtful and cooperative. But these tensions are, to my mind, places of possibility, containing the potential to consider our work differently, with change in mind.

I am interested in doing smaller work that has bigger connections with individuals. -- Marina Szijarto, Designer, DTES Community Play and DTES Romeo and Juliet

Judith Marcuse suggests there is a bigger picture of needed change here, that it is time to focus attention on broadening our base of support. She reminds us there is “a critical need” to bring in more people from other fields, from the business communities, from academia – “people who are not generally in these circles of conversations.” Judith believes that others outside our circles “are starting to realize that collectivity is the answer” to global and local crises. I hope she is right. I expect she is.

Hope and expectation. Of these two, hope is the stronger motivator, especially when combined with action. This is a challenge – a gauntlet? -- I present to myself.

The community theatre work is dangerous and powerful. -- Naomi Narvey, DTES community play participant

Questions of Follow-up (and inclusion)

Questions of inclusion are especially interesting to consider when discussing effective follow-up activity to a community play (or for that matter to other community-engaged theatre practices.) Where the original Colway model eschewed the need for follow-up, insisting that any theatre

artist's official role was complete following production strike, from the beginning Canadian devotees of the form have almost invariably facilitated post-production activity, albeit to greater and lesser degrees. Jumbles Theatre currently commits to a minimum of four years working in a given community, with the fourth year explicitly devoted to sustainability through the Legacies component of their programming. For Common Weal community play projects in the nineties, follow-up began with a post-production reunion and 'visioning' session, for which we facilitated consultation among community members about what direction(s) they would like to take.

In doing community art, we offer a mini-utopia. When the project is over, it is not utopian. -- Laurie McGauley

In 2004, at the request of Vancouver Moving Theatre, I facilitated a half-day follow-up workshop for participants in the DTES community play *In the Heart of a City*. Through a combination of image theatre techniques adapted from Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and verbal brainstorming techniques, that group of 60 + workshop attendees established that among their priorities for ongoing arts activity were opportunities for training, and for remuneration. The community play rehearsal process is demanding, and long. The fact that a total of over 80 volunteer performers (including musicians and actors) stuck it out through to closing night of the Downtown East Side Community Play is a testament to their commitment to their community, and to art-making. But the DTES represents Canada's poorest postal code. Honoraria or even wages for participants in future efforts were understandably named as a priority. Equally clearly, payment for participation limits the numbers of people who can be involved, and, as Laurie McGauley has pointed out, potentially changes the nature of the relationship with lead artists, who on some level are now not simply collaborators: are they not also bosses? ^{xiv}

A Utopian Vision: Multiple year funding with mid level grants from all levels of government and foundations. Give artists the financial support to do the work and community engaged theatre will flourish. -- Terry Hunter

While it is sometimes tempting to consider that the success of follow-up efforts depends on the amount of money available, the socio-economic circumstances of community members involved is at least as important a consideration, as is the level to which project development has integrated community members in substantial roles throughout development and production.

I keep writing short term project grants when what we need is a long-term focus. -- Cathy Stubington

Follow-up to the DTES collaborative community play has taken many forms, and has resulted in several productions, including five seasons of the enormously inclusive *Heart of the City Festival* (involving annually over 80 events, 25 venues and hundreds of artists and residents). And there

are indirect outgrowths of the DTES Community Play, not produced by VMT, such as the artfully irreverent Downtown Eastside Opera. At the symposium we hear about a new community opera project -- a co-production-in-process initiated by the Carnegie Centre with Dr. Sun Yat Sen Gardens -- which is bringing together First Nations and Chinese artists in collaboration.

For companies represented at the symposium whose engaged work does not depart from the Colway model, the very concept of 'follow-up' may not apply. I am thinking, for example, of Miscellaneous Productions, whose work over the long-term with at-risk youth in East Vancouver, often employs a queer/camp aesthetic toward social analysis and political critique.

Along with most of our professional Artistic Team, I live and work in East Van. We are all emotionally and politically connected to the community, and have a commitment to making art that is relevant and accessible.
-- Elaine Carol

As for the *DTES Romeo and Juliet*, Savannah Walling has described it as being "collaboratively created by a small community, within a geographically defined neighbourhood, in a dance balancing process and product."^{xv} Undeniably and unavoidably, this ensemble of cast members, this 'small community', will have excluded some from participation, and all the more so since participation in the project was determined by audition. If one considers the whole gamut of art projects produced by VMT in the DTES, then a charge of exclusivity would be out of the question. And, of course, no one company can ever manage to be all things to all people. But, taken separately, the 'exclusive' nature of the R and J project has allowed questions to be raised about the desired role(s) for community arts in the neighbourhood. Who are included as performers? Who are included as audience? Who is included in the community?

Monday morning -- "Trippingly on the Tongue."

The statues are speaking to me in iambic pentameter.

I am in a workshop titled "Mr. Bill Shakespeare." For this particular exercise, workshop leader Mike Stack distributed to each participant a different short quotation from various of Shakespeare's plays. He has instructed us that, in pairs, one individual is to repeat the text over and over vocally, while acting as the 'clay' for her partner, the sculptor. Each sculptor will then create poses to match -- or to counter -- the effect of the line being recited. Those of us observing had an opportunity to stroll through a 'gallery' of speaking statues.

And what a transformation.

Shakespeare's short lines, taken entirely out of context. In their early experimentations, some among the individual statues begin with tentative repetitions of their short texts. Others loudly declaim, already full of sound and fury. Yet others are playing with different volumes, intonations, and rhythms. In the delightful cacophony of this sculpting session-in-progress, I hear snippets of many texts, with many 'interpretations.' I hear some spoken lightly, displaying a sense of fluency with the language that I had not expected. Texts spoken with a sense of fun. Texts spoken "trippingly on the tongue."



DTES community actor Mike Richter in the "Mr. Bill Shakespeare" workshop

When the sculptors have arrived at a final pose they are happy with, I meander through, absorbing as I walk the voices of many individuals speaking at cross-purposes, and then stopping to observe each individual 'artwork' more closely. A few of the speaking statues have tears welling in their eyes. I do too. Collaborations between speakers and sculptors have provided the missing context for the lines. The context is now, here, in this moment, in this room, with these people.

Mike Stack tells us that the rhythm of iambic pentameter is similar to the rhythm of a heartbeat. I think about how even our heartbeats are different, and irregular. Sometimes mine is faster, sometimes slower. Hearts that murmur. Hearts that declaim. Hearts that race along. Can two hearts ever really beat as one? I think not. And, I think: if yes, how dull that would be.

Insiders and Outsiders

Interestingly, and with exceptions (myself included), a significant number of the Canadian practitioners have adopted the Colway process within their home communities, in contrast with the original model's firm insistence that an 'outsider' artist brings needed objectivity, and can stand apart from small 'p' politics in ways that a community member cannot.

Writing about insider/outsider positions among grassroots ensemble approaches in the United States, Sonja Kuffinec provides this succinct analysis:

'Insider' ethnographers and community-based theatre makers emerge from within a particular group to consider and document its cultural practices. [...] Such a theater [is] one in which the makers are part of the culture from which the work is drawn. Not surprisingly, critics of insider research propose that it is a deterrent to

objective perception and analysis, while supporters argue that insiders are more likely to pick up on non-verbal expressive cues, and more easily establish trust-based relationships.

In contrast, an 'outsider' has the advantage of recognizing difference, of viewing a community or culture with critical distance. [...] Outsider status may also carry distinct advantages to projects purporting to bring together disparate groups through theater .^{xvi}

In fact, many of the community plays, and successive projects that constitute follow-up activity, have included both residents and non-residents on professional artistic teams. As Savannah Walling has pointed out, doing so “gains advantages of ‘outsider’ involvement and ‘insider’ involvement. Including both as key players has been a conscious choice.”^{xvii}

A hard question to ask ourselves is ‘Where are we in the work?’ We live in these communities, we’re participants in these communities, and I think it is important that our voice is in the work somewhere. -- Elaine Carol

Nomads

Among artists grounded in the community play form, as well as those attending the symposium with different performance backgrounds that brought them to collaborative engaged practices, we see a range of relationships to, and ‘definitions’ of, the communities with whom they work. In addition to Dale Hamilton’s Eramosa project, lead artists for community plays in Enderby (Cathy Stubington of Runaway Moon) and in the Downtown East Side (Savannah Walling and Terry Hunter of Vancouver Moving Theatre) have been residents of these places themselves. These artists’ long-term contributions to community in ‘their’ place has meant that significant follow-up activity is more feasible, and some would argue is essential, compared to those of us who – like me -- could arguably be labeled ‘nomadic’ contemporary artists working with communities.

Critic Miwon Kwon has written of the nomadic artist, “He or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as a guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary in-house critic, or pseudo-ethnographer.”^{xviii} Even though Kwon is critiquing, in this excerpt, practices of conceptual artists who work on site-specific commissions from art institutions, it is useful to be aware of risks associated with being a ‘professional’ community-based artist who is, at least in perception, in some way an ‘outsider’ to a community. These risks include the potential for exploitation of a community’s stories, of being disproportionately credited as an individual for the work of a collective, and of taking a certain moral high ground with regard to the social benefits of the work, without engaging thoroughly in

community issues, and in relationships with community people. Another risk, familiar to those who constantly attempt to work ethically in community-based work, is of appropriating and benefiting from stories based in the lives of cultural communities that are in some way 'other' to our own culture, or are 'Othered' by the dominant perceived 'norms' of white- and heterosexist-dominated society.

I want to open up a space where authentic dialogue takes place. -- David Diamond, Artistic Director, Headlines Theatre

We're producers of little birds whispering the truth to people that see it. You can only do so much, but make sure these little birds can speak loud and clear and send them around the world. -- Patrick Foley

But it is quite a different situation when Jumbles Theatre devotes a minimum of four years developing, producing, and sustaining, through the company's legacy project, relationships and community-expressive artistic activities. In such a case, the work of the artist whom some may still consider to be a privileged 'ethnographer' to the community^{xix}, cannot be contained and adequately described by binaries that wish to describe who is 'of' and who is 'not of' a community. Four years is a long time – not, I think, what Kwon had in mind with the naming of the 'nomadic' artist. The circus that is Jumbles Theatre seems to be sticking around.

I don't think artists need to have a prior connection to the community. Of course they need to be able to 'relate' to the community in the course of the project, and that's why one needs the right kind of artist. -- Ruth Howard

Rigid consideration of what and who constitute a community risks a reductive notion of what are, in fact, complex interrelations. This remains problematic even while acknowledging that any group named or naming itself as 'a community' is in some way defining itself in opposition to, or as being different from, other communities, or groups – other communities or groups that individuals may also consider that they 'belong' to.

I think no one attending this symposium would disagree that we should really conceive of 'community' as complex, and ever-evolving. And not surprisingly, most artists and companies at the symposium work to ensure that diverse 'communities within communities' are represented on professional artist teams, Boards of Directors, and community play steering teams. Nonetheless, the situation of the community-engaged artist, as evidenced through discussions at the symposium, will surely always need to negotiate celebration of community identity, along with tensions and conflicts inherent to a passionate belief that the responsibilities of privilege and certain kinds of difference – whether access to education, arts training, or privilege based on

racial, gender or sexual identity, for example – mean it is important that we extend beyond ourselves and work with people who are ‘not us.’ Community-engaged artists tend to believe that the skills we have been able to acquire ought to be shared with people. And perhaps one definition of a ‘successful’ community-based artist might consider whether she has the ability to climb her own steep learning curves in areas of knowledge shared by community participants.

The principle of extreme inclusiveness means that ‘Others’ will also be encountered for community participants who live within the geographically-defined community. The benefits of this experience – this ‘bringing together’ of people – form one of the most frequently cited benefits of the community play experience. -- Savannah Walling

Most of us attending the symposium would also agree that identity concerns, and asking questions about our roles as artists in relationship with others, remain vitally important. We often end up working with people of other racial, cultural and ethnic identities. This phenomenon holds true even for those artists who live within the geographically defined community where they do their work. And even those geographical boundaries can be disputed; as Terry Hunter of VMT related during an informal evening session at the symposium, when he and Savannah Walling were first approached to take on the DTES community play, they argued between them whether their co-op home of many years situated them as residents of Strathcona, or of the Downtown East Side, or simultaneously of both.

The field of community-based arts will play a significant role in helping Canadians—and the rest of the world—develop their intercultural fluency. -- Will Weigler, theatre artist and doctoral student at University of Victoria

Another important factor influencing the nature and sustainability of relationships between artists and communities is whether a project is produced by a company whose infrastructure is stable and substantial enough to provide support in the long-term (another argument for increased resources for community arts.) Similarly, the mandate of the producing company will play a role. Jumblies Theatre, founded in Toronto by artistic director Ruth Howard, has explicitly addressed



DTES community Rapporteur Patrick Foley in conversation with Jill P. Weaving, Arts and Culture Coordinator for Vancouver Parks and Recreation

sustainability concerns through a multi-faceted approach, which includes but also goes farther than a partnership model by committing to “multi-year residencies, moving through phases of research and development, creation, production, and legacy.” The Jumblies mandate explicitly states that the company aims to “create lasting relationships with people and places.” So whereas -- if adhering to strict identity definitions -- not all of Jumblies artists “belong” to the communities within which they work, the company has built a practice that allows participants to celebrate their identity/identities, while maintaining (and supporting over the long-term) a fluid definition of community. By way of example of this fluidity, and of continuity, consider that community participants from the Jumblies’ Davenport Perth neighbourhood residency, whose production was titled *Once a Shoreline*, were also featured as ‘guest’ performers in *Bridge of One Hour*, produced in Etobicoke in collaboration with largely Somali residents of an apartment complex.

Both the professional and community artists are vulnerable to post-production let-down in their home community. The professional artists will have to cope with the aftermath of any unhealthy legacies left in the wake of their projects. -- Savannah Walling

Looking at the range of follow-up activities that have taken place on the Downtown East Side does, without question, speak to advantages of there being lead community play artists who are also resident in the community. Cathy Stubington’s company Runaway Moon, based in Enderby, B.C. provides another testament to the power of longer term residency. But I fear that criticisms of community artists who work in other ways, with various groups, are becoming increasingly loud and more numerous. I resist an orthodoxy that believes there is one ‘best’ practice. As this symposium demonstrates, there are many and diverse *good* practices, from the Theatre for Living methodology of David Diamond’s Headlines Theatre, to the youth-centred issue-based theatre works of Elaine Carol at Miscellaneous Productions^{xx}. Good practices, not best practices. If we say ‘best’, we risk becoming complacent, because we have found an answer. If we say ‘good’, then we can be constantly re-evaluating to try and be even better.

Tuesday evening: “Assessing Assessment” (those pesky evaluations.)

Judith Marcuse has organized a dialogue session titled Developing the Next Generation. The large, open room at the Segal School of Business of Simon Fraser University provides barely enough space. Our symposium circle has now expanded to include educators and arts education students. As I listen to introductions around the circle, I am acutely aware of how few opportunities we have to engage in this kind of ‘cross-talk.’

How do we support the creation of participatory art that has unqualified artistic merit? -- Will Weigler

We break into smaller groups to name individual current passions, and to identify one challenge or issue that is a barrier to accomplishing our work. In an adapted 'dot democracy' format, as a whole group we arrive at two broadly common topics for discussion: "Creating Engagement Across Diversity", and "How to convince others of the legitimacy of our work."

A question is raised: legitimate to whom?

Historically, practitioners in the field of community-based arts have lacked a strong sense of connection with one another. In recent years stronger alliances have been forged and momentum is gaining for a much more unified future: unified in our diverse practices. -- Will Weigler

Judith refines the legitimacy question, asking us to share success stories, and to offer ideas around why this work is not being supported -- why does it remain on the fringes? -- and suggestions for what we can do to bring this work further into positions of power.

There are many of these success stories, from taking note of the creation of funding programs that now – to a small extent - support 'this kind of work', to stories of divided communities brought together for dialogue across racial, ethnic, economic and other areas of difference. It is clear that one way to convince others of the legitimacy of the work is to simply keep making the work, documenting it, and disseminating success stories. Easier said than done, however, with limited resources, and limited access to corridors of power.

Even in my darkest hour, something inside me, here, kept fighting. I had almost given up, but then I got a part in the community play and it reminded me of who I am. -- Dalannah Gail Bowen, DTES community play participant

Sometimes the success stories that come forward are more easily quantifiable, such as statistics of large numbers of participants who, as a result of a particular project, sought help for their addictions. Other successes are less easily translated into 'data' and 'measurable results.' This leads us into discussion of social science related models for evaluation. Many are frustrated with the 'evidence-based', 'deterministic', quantitative evaluations that are required by some funders.

Of course this is not the first time such a gathering has expressed frustrations with funders' emphasis on tangibles, on measurable results. Art involves ways of knowing the world – and of re-creating the world -- that are unquantifiable within strictly statistical social science approaches. Several people in this circle suggest that we must "take charge" of evaluation, "take control," make it our own. After all, the evaluation process should, above all else, be useful for us, towards ever adapting and improving how we do what we do.

We hear more stories of successes, now directly related to questions of evaluation. We hear stories from artists who have come around to adapting and implementing evaluation procedures as integral to their process, and collect both quantitative and qualitative data. As one artist commented, "Isn't it good for us to know how many people came out to participate, how many dropped out, and how many stayed the course?"

For others, the design of the evaluation process itself has become increasingly participatory, which in turn increases empowerment and ownership among community members, and hence the efficacy of the project.

Evaluation as Art

Perhaps part of our job as artists working in engaged forms is to re-tool or re-think the languages we use to describe and report on our work. Several people in the dialogue session urged that we must not allow ourselves to use terminology we think others want us to use, but to insist on using our own languages, and our own frames and frameworks.

It occurs to me that if the power of our work lies largely in an ability to speak through metaphor, through more associative languages, and to allow audience to co-create meaning, then perhaps one way of ‘taking charge’ of our own evaluations can be to more effectively use the languages of art in the final reports we submit to funders. After all, our funders have agreed to support our projects because on some level they ‘know’ that this work (in the words of Danielle Boutet), “holds power to make us feel and know things and relations that are invisible.”^{xxi}

An example of the kind of thing I am thinking about: As I am writing this report, I remember a presentation by Ruth Howard held later in the symposium, in which she described a planning retreat for artists at the end of a three-year community-based project, just as the company was entering into a year of building legacy and sustainability post-production. She asked the artists to write on small stones ideas for follow-up activity that they would like to have happen, and that they individually would/could put energy into realizing. The stones were then used to form a ‘path’ for the artists to walk along -- literally (and hence metaphorically) and in the more traditionally social science sense of creating a ‘critical path.’ Through a participatory game the group revisited the stones a year later, and tossed into the river those that either represented a completed activity, or those that were deemed to have become irrelevant in the intervening months. What remained were a pile of stones representing activities and projects that were/would still be interesting within the community, and that artists were also still interested in and available to accomplish.

*It is the bureaucracy that burns us out – it is not the work – we love working with people.
When I sleep at night, I don't dream about the woman of my dreams, I dream about having a full-time general manager. -- Elaine Carol*

provides a storefront Gathering Space where objects created and/or collected can be documented and distributed or otherwise disseminated. Research activities included the Farm Animal Project, in this neighbourhood that was once among the biggest stockyards in North America. Toy farm animals were left here and there around the neighbourhood, with tags soliciting stories about pets, the Stockyards, or other animal tales. Loree also describes the Photo Treasure Hunt, in which 13 participants were given a disposable camera and an alphabet of community themes, and asked to interpret each theme in a single photograph. Objects and artworks collected then become material for installations and exhibits at the storefront Gathering Space.

I present on my concept of 'performative text.' Performative text can take many forms, including, for the Rights Here! project,^{xxii} words that are alternately concealed or revealed on performers' costumes, or that represent the language of officialdom in human rights discourse on handheld boards in choreographed movement segments.

Ruth Howard presents possibilities for script formats - her own and other artists' -designed to convey visual and oral narratives, while still leaving space for a director's interpretation. We see multiple wall maps of an environmental performance trajectory, drawn as seen and interpreted by various individuals. Although these performance maps were created as part of an exploratory training workshop, it occurs to me that such multiple visions in an actual 'script' creation could be an appropriate and effective vehicle for emphasizing the layers of possible meanings one can choose from among to present to an audience, and from which a director (or designer, or writer) could select various elements - colours, textures, sounds, texts. Exciting stuff. Ruth also offers us an example of a script provided to the composer for the most recent Jumblies production of Bridge of One Hair, in which separate columns indicate timings and various stage languages occurring simultaneously: these columns include some spoken text, but also describe movements of actors and groups of actors, and slide projections. This interdisciplinary script functions like a musical 'score', outlining the different stage languages in concert together, not unlike the way layers of instrumentation are documented as the maestro's map for an opera.

*As a designer, working with my hands cuts across a lot of language barriers.
-- Marina Szijarto*

In this session I also hear about the challenges of working in a large-scale shadow puppet medium, which, as Cathy Stubington points out, cannot carry lengthy dialogue, and so relies heavily on symbolic imagery. Savannah Walling explains the challenges of documenting in 'script' form all of the many technical elements that needed to come together for the DTES shadow play as "a delicate process balancing visual, verbal and musical languages to build meaningful, accessible and compelling narrative". Judith Marcuse tells us of the thick binder known as 'the bible' for Ice: Beyond Cool - the stage manager's prompt book - which she considers is the only adequate representation of that production's 'script.'

Why all this talk of interdisciplinary scripts?

Much community-based performance seems to be moving even farther away from the realism that still dominates most regional theatre fare. This move to more interdisciplinary approaches is, on one level, simply part of a larger current fashion in aesthetics that we also see in other contemporary ensemble and performance creation methodologies.

But I would argue that the substance of the work we engage with in community performance, similar to the development of feminist theatre collective work in the 1970's and 80's^{xxiii}, makes it even more pressing, for some artists, to break the trap of realism. Realism 'locks in' meaning through representation; as such, it seems all the more important to break realism in engaged work, or else risk an objectified, reductive perception of the community that is being represented. Also, community-based work usually wishes to actively implicate, or invite, audience reflection, I venture to a greater degree than much of what we see in regional, subscription-based institutions. Since realism represents a more 'closed' text, it seems logical that community-engaged theatre would wish to turn to more 'open', associative texts.^{xxiv} Using more conceptual or suggestive 'languages' can invite audiences to make their own associative meanings, without necessarily completely giving over to ambiguity in the creators' own position(s) or intention(s). A more conceptual container can open up space for multiple possible realities.

I know that in the early nineties, when I first began to develop a community-engaged practice, I felt a need to work in realism to a certain degree – an eclectic realism incorporating popular performance forms -- so as to remain accessible to audiences and participants who are unlikely to be familiar with more experimental forms. Over the years my views have changed. When I have seen, for instance, the more visual than traditional narratives of Jumblies Theatre, or the community-based contemporary dance events staged in national parks by Bill Coleman,^{xxv} I thrill to witness community member participation in the work, and the excited responses of audiences.

Above all, as further evidenced at this symposium (and at the risk of stating the obvious), I am excited to note that among community arts practices there are many and diverse aesthetic possibilities, choices, preferences, and narrative styles.

It is critical that we have more support -- more human resources support, more infrastructure support -- so that the work of the artists can continue.
-- Judith Marcuse

Wednesday afternoon -- "Stepping into what is next"

The final formal session of the symposium is called "Next Steps." We are, for this session, another big group. Everyone names a desire, need, or priority for a next step. And then we run out of time.

Some people present have mentioned that they are developing flip chart fatigue syndrome. This session fills several flip chart pages. The list of desired 'next steps' is long, from a community play resource centre, to collaborative projects on a national scale.

Time is always the enemy when we reach this "next steps" stage of the symposium. Now that there are more of us attending, symposium time to talk is even shorter. But ideas and energy and brainpower and potential commitment – and yes, time if tasks are shared – are even greater.

Should one next step be a symposium whose theme is "Next Steps?"

*It feels like our field of endeavour is coming of age and I'm still abuzz from it.
-- Dale Hamilton*

It is not often that we have the opportunity to hear in such depth and breadth about the work from the artists who are doing the work. -- Judith Marcuse

*I came away from the Symposium inspired by the breadth, quality, integrity, talent, drive, commitment and intelligence of the Canadian artists working in the field of community engaged theatre.
-- Terry Hunter*

Wednesday evening

At the Radha Eatery for the supper that closes the symposium.

I am pleased to be seated between two people whom I met for the first time only a few days before.

New Conversations. New Directions.



Dale Hamilton and Rachael Van Fossen moving in new directions

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ For three weeks in January 2004, nine mid-career Canadian artists came together to work with a group of senior artists and media producers as part of Documenting Engagement: A Community Artists Media Institute, presented by Pacific Cinémathèque in partnership with the Roundhouse Community Centre. Together, this group investigated the practice of community-based arts and explored the potential of digital video as a means of documenting the aesthetics of engagement inherent in this art form, creating eight short videos about their arts practice. Copies of the suite of videos produced during the Institute are available for purchase at Pacific Cinémathèque.
<http://www.cinematheque.bc.ca/education/special_projects.htm>
- ⁱⁱ Excerpted from the brochure for the *New Directions Canadian Community Play Exchange Symposium*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jellicoe, Ann. Community Plays: How to Put Them On. London: Methuen, 1987. See Jellicoe pages 3 – 9, for her description of *The Reckoning* (1972), the precursor to later Colway-style community plays.
- ^{iv} Jon Oram's company *Claque Theatre* in England has developed out of the Colway Theatre Trust.
- ^v Freire, Paulo. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Rev. Ed. New York: Continuum, 1997. Freire describes a process of purposeful social change based in praxis (reflection and action) and dialogue. Since dialogical exchange involves subjects working *with* each other, resulting action cannot be based in a preconceived outcome.
- ^{vi} Pam Hall's presentation "Risky Business: Speculations on the Challenges of Engagement" took place at the conference *Live in Public: The Art of Engagement*, held in Vancouver October 10 – 13, 2007. The presentation is available on the web at <http://www.islandsinstitute.com/gallery/Pam-Hall/index.htm> (Accessed October 31, 2008.)
- ^{vii} Howard, Ruth and Rachael Van Fossen. "Easy to Say: Reflections on the roles of art and the artist in Canadian adaptations of the Colway Community Play form." <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/interarts/ym127519225806062500.htm> (Accessed October 31, 2008.)
- ^{viii} Van Fossen, Rachael. "The Artist as Agent of Change (in Herself.)" MFA thesis-portfolio. Goddard College, Interdisciplinary Arts, 2007.
- ^{ix} Judith Marcuse Projects (JMP) and Simon Fraser University have partnered to establish the International Centre of Art for Social Change (ICASC), the first of its kind in North America. ICASC is a global centre for networking, training, professional development, research and community outreach in the burgeoning field of art for social change. <http://www.icasc.ca> (Accessed October 31, 2008.)
- ^x The Performance Creation Canada website is <http://www.performancecreationcanada.ca/> (Accessed October 31, 2008.)
- ^{xi} For example, *The Spirit of Shivaree* (Eramosa Community Play, 1990) *Ka'ma'mo'picik / The Gathering*, (Calling Lakes Community Play, 1992 and 1993), *Many Hands* (Blyth Community Play, 1994), *Dene Suline Ho Ni Ye* (Wollaston Lake Community Play, 1994), *A North Side Story - or two* (North Central Community Play, 1995), *Not the Way I Heard It* (Enderby and District Community Play, 1997), *In the Heart of a City* (DTES Community Play, 2003), *Once a Shoreline*

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- (Jumbles Theatre's Davenport- Perth Neighbourhood Centre community play, 2004.)
- xii See Goldbard, Arlene. New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development. Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2006. 87 – 91.
- xiii McGauley, Laurie. "IMAGINE: An External Review of the Canada Council for the Arts' Artists and Community Collaboration Fund." Canada Council for the Arts, 2006. "Throughout these attempts to understand this impulse to relationship, engagement and dialogue, there is a sphere of relational activity that leads from one end towards what is referred to as 'community informed' art. Artists who collect stories, images, dance gestures from non-artist communities to then feed and inspire their own individual artwork start us down the slippery slope outside the realm of artist community collaboration. At the other end, we have artists entering communities with the intention to teach them something, whether it be art or self-esteem. In between these two opposite extremes of the continuum, lies a more interactive collaboration: when the artist is giving and taking with the community. It is this exchange, this engaged dialogue that is producing some of the most intriguing and moving art in this country." (8)
<http://www.canadacouncil.ca/cgi-bin/MsmGo.exe?grab_id=0&page_id=1064&query=imagine&hiword=IMAGINATION%20IMAGINED%20IMAGINES%20IMAGINING%20imagine%20> (Accessed October 31, 2008.)
- xiv McGauley, Laurie. "IMAGINE: An External Review of the Canada Council for the Arts' Artists and Community Collaboration Fund." Canada Council for the Arts, 2006. "[When participants are paid] the relationship between the artists and the participants is qualitatively different than that of an artist in a community based project. Especially in projects where job readiness skills such as punctuality, etc. are being evaluated as well as shared, there is an essential power dynamic that needs to be acknowledged. If the participants are being paid, does that make the artist the boss?" (12)
- xv Walling, Savannah. E-mail to Rachael Van Fossen. "Re: FW: RVF Rapporteur outline." 08 June. 2008.
- xvi Kuffinec, Sonja. Staging America: Cornerstone and Community-based Theatre. Southern Illinois University Press, 2005. (12)
- xvii Walling, Savannah. E-mail to Rachael Van Fossen. "Re: Rapporteur's report feedback." 12 September 2008.
- xviii Kwon, Miwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. (46)
- xix See Hal Foster's "The Artist as Ethnographer?" The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology. Geroge E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, eds. Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.
- xx <<http://www.miscellaneous-inc.org/index.htm>>
- xxi Boutet, Danielle. "Without art, the world is meaningless." MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts Commencement Address, Goddard College. 11 February 2007.
- xxii *Rights Here!/ Droits devant!:* *An International Exchange Project in Theatre and Law for Human Rights* was performed in the Park Extension neighbourhood of Montreal in July, 2007. The project was co-produced through partnerships among Teesri Duniya Theatre, Park Extension Youth Organization, Concordia University Theatre and Development, and a team of lawyers from the Quebec Division of the Canadian Bar Association.

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- ^{xxiii} See, as but one Canadian example of discussions around feminist narrative aesthetics, the CTR special issue on “Feminism and Canadian Theatre.” Canadian Theatre Review 43 (Summer 1985)
- ^{xxiv} Eco, Umberto. The Open Work. Trans. Anna Cancogni. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- ^{xxv} In partnership with Common Weal Community Arts, in 2004 the dance company Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie created *Grasslands: Where Heaven Meets Earth* in Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan. In Newfoundland in 2006, Coleman Lemieux produced *The Gros Morne Project: Feel the Earth Move*. <http://www.colemanlemieux.com> (Last accessed October 31, 2008.)