

Report on The 4rth National
Canadian Play Exchange Symposium
April 27-30, 2008
Vancouver, B. C.
By Patrick Foley
Downtown Eastside rapporteur

Introduction:

In this report I will attempt to inform the reader about the 4th National Canadian Play Exchange Symposium. I will state its purpose, describe some of the work of the participants, summarize the sessions chronologically, and list many of the hopes and suggestions that came from the participants. Also, at times in this report, I will pose a few questions or comments followed by my initials, (pf). Finally, as the DTES rapporteur for this symposium, I will provide a summary of practices, ideas, and questions that came out of the conference that may be of interest for community artists and others working in this neighborhood.

The purpose of the 4th National Canadian Play Exchange Symposium was to: “ . . . explore new styles of collaborative community play-building, honor the legacy, examine the logistics of interdisciplinary creation, and build new local, provincial, and national connections among Canadian community play artists.”

The Vancouver Moving Theatre produced this symposium, Terry Hunter, producer, and Savannah Walling, artistic director. It took place at four different venues: The Carnegie Centre in the Downtown Eastside, The Russian Hall, The Segal School of Business, and the Roundhouse Community Centre. Susan Gordon was coordinator, and Sharon Kravitz took care of hospitality.

According to Savannah Walling there were 21 core participants who gave presentations, including 6 from the Downtown Eastside. Altogether 70 people attended the various events.

For bios of the participants see Vancouver Moving Theatre's program notes in *New Directions: The 4th National Canadian Community Play Exchange Symposium*. See appendix.

The symposium began with a production of Vancouver Moving Theatre's *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet*, Gina Bastone, director. This play had an enthusiastic response and was an example of a small-scale, collaboratively created community play, or as some call it—community engaged theatre. It was a satire on the preconceptions many people have about people in the DTES. It was filled with loads of humor, lots of energy, a modicum of slapstick, poignant moments, colorful costumes, and some wonderful dances. This play was also an example of VMT's work in the DTES, a neighborhood fighting for its survival amid growing real estate speculation, condo developments, and gentrification.

After the play there was a reception for the participants. Old friends met, new friends were made, and all enjoyed some tasty tit-bits and beverages. Later, after a scrumptious supper, Terry Hunter gave an orientation and told everyone what was to come. Participants soon started the ball rolling with some lively talk

and interesting discussions about community play-making. People touched on many of the topics covered later in greater depth such as:

- Documenting the work
- Undertaking a national community play
- Building networks to share information and resources
- Taking more risks in the work
- Forming partnerships with other agencies and institutions
- Teaching and mentoring others about community engaged theatre
- Passing on the torch to a younger generation.
- Building a website for community plays
- Establishing a set of ethical guidelines

Day 1. Mike Stack's Workshop on Shakespeare:

Participants began day 2 with a workshop on Shakespeare with Mike Stack. He is an actor, director, teacher, and ardent lover of the Bard. He asked all present: "What was your experience with Shakespeare?" Some said they had "love affairs" with him. One lady said she couldn't read him "because the text was too small." And one knowledgeable bloke said that the late great Derek Jacobi turned him on to Shakespeare. Stack then gave out some nuggets of wisdom: "The vowels carry the emotion; consonants carry the intellect." He praised Shakespeare: "In one line he gives us the story and human experience of that character." And how about: "His writing plumbs the depth of our souls." He then whetted people's appetite for Shakespeare with: "*Richard III* was compellingly delicious." He recommended Simon Callow's book: *Being an Actor*. He gave out some tongue twisters and said that to do Shakespeare justice, it is necessary to exercise the tongue and muscles around the mouth. And finally, to set an example, he gave a spirited, short reading from *The Tempest*.

Working In The Inner City:

In the afternoon three presenters gave talks on working in the inner city. David Diamond, the artistic director of Headlines, has been doing theatre for over 27 years with over 400 performances. Many of his pieces deal with social issues: poverty, gang violence, drug addiction and alcoholism. He mentioned that he used to do 'theatre of the oppressed' but now does 'theatre of living'; he also has a new book out called "Theatre of Living". In his work he wants to create a safe space for the actors, and to get at the root causes of problems, not just the symptoms. To create a new piece he waits until a group or a community invites him. He said: "It's a six-day process, 8 hours-a-day, and pen never goes to paper."

Ethel Whitty and Earle Peach were largely responsible for the creation of the Downtown Eastside opera: *Condemned*. Whitty, who has been the director of the Carnegie Centre for 4 years, initiated the project because the pieces were in place: “The Downtown Eastside has a history of musical performances and quite a few are involved in theatre, so,” she asked, “Why not do an opera?” With the theme of ‘home and belonging’, she got several community writers and a facilitator to create the libretto. Later, Earle Peach wrote the score. With a director hired, the roles cast, rehearsals held, and with Peach holding the baton, *Condemned* was finally performed, first at the Carnegie Centre and later at the Firehall. This was extremely difficult and challenging work. The rewards, however, were that it played to enthusiastic audiences and mostly full houses. Later, at the request of the B. C. Housing Coalition, it was remounted with some new cast members and played at St. James Square in Kitsilano. Now there is talk of forming a Downtown Eastside Opera Society. The opera also inspired two other projects: an opera involving the collaboration between the Chinese and First Nations, and a satire on the Downtown Eastside and the Olympics

Day 2. Downtown Eastside Participants Speak:

Several actors and a musician who were in DTES community plays took to the podium at Carnegie and delivered some heartfelt and moving talks.

Dalannah Gail Bowen has been a jazz and blues singer for over 40 years. She spoke from the heart about her life and being troubled by drug addiction, homelessness, and a stroke. When she was homeless and down, she kept asking: “What is my purpose?” She had almost given up when she tried out and got a part in the community play: *In the Heart of A City*. This opportunity “. . . reminded me who I am.” It also motivated her to re-establish her singing career. She said: “A community play unifies the people, dissolves isolation, and creates a collective self. It is something magical.” She would like to see more opportunities for DTES residents to participate in projects while having financial security. Bowen also believes there is still a need to break down barriers, provide more training, and establish more venues for rehearsals. She would also like to see a website posting upcoming events, workshops, community plays, and auditions

Leith Harris is a long-time DTES resident, activist, actor, and writer. She said: “I love the Downtown Eastside.” This was shown in her volunteering, working at the Carnegie front desk, participating in numerous DTES plays: *Rare Earth Arias*, *I Love the Downtown Eastside*, *Through the People’s Voice*, and *The Shadows Project*. She also helped to

organize the *In the heart of A City Festival*. Harris said she was proud of the actors in *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet*, some of who lived on the street. But she also asked: "Who are the shows for? Are they benefiting the very poor?" She hoped that the people who the shows are about are able to see them. Harris also said there is a need for more street theatre to involve the homeless.

Gena Thompson is another engaging performer and singer. She referred to herself as "a diva for old Chinese men." She acted in the DTES community play and had a part in *Condemned*. She felt a need ". . . to make the pain go away and to make a connection with what's going on." Getting her disability approved helped her to move forward. At Carnegie she became a member of the board and was also able to work on community plays. But it was not all a bowl of cherries. "I catch a cold during every play", she said. Poverty is a major problem in the neighborhood. This made Thompson say: "We can't wait for people to get used to sharing." When she looks around at the people, she is convinced that no one has ever told them: "You look good." Thompson ended her talk on a more positive note. This talented lady said: "I have hope for the future." And: "I want to have a career in show-biz."

Sandra Pronteau is a DTES resident and performer originally from The Pas, Manitoba. She has multiple disabilities and was in foster care when she was young. She has been through addiction, relapse and recovery. "I wouldn't be here today," she said, "If it hadn't been for the community play." By her participating in the play, she became aware that "I find I need to make a daily commitment to a structure." Pronteau believes that a community play benefits a community: it strengthens a community by organizations forming partnerships, it celebrates the community, it brings art to the DTES, it lets people have fun, it addresses some of the problems, and it enables people to gain respect. She also feels that by having done the play, "I listen to people more. I continue to grow as a person, and I say hello to more people walking down the street." Now, Pronteau wants to do more acting, try out for the up-coming opera, share performances with her family and friends, and see a play done about the Residential Schools.

Jim Sands has performed in 3 DTES community plays as a musician and an actor. Sands heard about the play at a conference from Cathy Stubington from Enderby. He joined the band and realized: "There are interdependencies. You play with others. There are a million reasons not to get along. You have to decide: are you in or out?" Sands says that "Doing a community play has a healing effect . . . It's like people come to help put out a fire." In the *Romeo and Juliet* piece, Sands became a member of the acting troop. He had lessons in character development,

got feedback for his work, and learned to negotiate in small groups. For Sands, the challenges ahead are to: get beyond a utopian view of the community, develop a vision for the neighborhood, engage with the community, and try to represent and define the soul of the community.

One Downtown Eastside resident who figures prominently as an actor, activist, speaker, community leader, and writer is Steve Lytton. He is a First Nations from Lytton. He was an actor in the DTES community play and also in *Crime and Punishment*. Lytton says that in doing this work, “We must speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.” He also takes a critical look at community art projects: “We need to know how these community art projects benefited, impacted, or changed our community.” He wants to see the DTES collaborate on art projects with other communities who face similar issues and challenges. One problem is that of the missing women. He sees people coming to the city with hopes and dreams but they fall by the wayside because “No one is there to help them when they fall.” However, he feels that people who participate in community plays becoming stronger. They don’t lose their way or become victims. Lytton also wants something to be done about accessibility for the disabled, especially in venues that don’t have wheelchair access. Some of his friends couldn’t see him perform because there was no wheelchair access. This is especially true for the Russian Hall and the Ukrainian Hall, two venues that have generously supported DTES performances.

Grant Chancey is an accomplished actor from the Downtown Eastside. He took a jaundiced view of developers’ ability to get height restrictions lifted and rezoning. “This affects our neighborhood,” he said. He also takes issue with the fact that “Many of the people who we speak for and who the play is about, don’t see it. They don’t participate.” He does, however, see the work as “spreading knowledge and awareness of our issues.” He fears that as artists doing creative work, we are contributing to the gentrification of the DTES. The question he raises is: Can culture in the DTES be a positive selling point for a buyer or a realtor? Chancey sees other problems as: not enough funding for projects, burnout because the work falls on too few, need for support for the disabled who want to act, and poverty: people need to be adequately compensated for their work.

Day 3. The Gina Bastone Clown Workshop:

This was a hands-on workshop in learning how to be funny. Bastone is a dynamic and entertaining teacher, as well as a clown, director, and playwright. She was clear to all about her take on humor: “Clowns don’t

say funny things; they say things funny.” She proved this with an exercise in which people pick a piece of paper out of a hat, go behind a screen, come out, and say what was written on it. What was surprising was that the people were really funny saying quite ordinary things.

Bastone was also generous with other gems of wisdom about theatre. She said: “Do you use all your attention and energy on stage?” The answer: “No, you use 90% but keep 10% for observing and monitoring.” Again: “The audience’s attention is always drawn to the new person who enters on stage.” She talked about how clowns are different: “A clown plays one character, an actor plays many characters.” And: “A clown is a combination of the traits of all the people you have encountered from your life.” If what you’re doing isn’t working on stage, Bastone says: “. . . you got to stop and change direction, change what you are doing.” She asked the crowd: “How does an audience know when to laugh?” Simple. “Have your eyes on the audience. This gives them permission to laugh.” She offered oodles of advice: She said you got to know about: “Sharing and grabbing focus, making your partner the centre of attention and then taking it.” She gave out some other challenging exercises that almost everyone did. Finally, she talked about the different types of clowns. Bastone said when you see a Black Clown in action, you say: “What nerve! What guts!” They are the intelligent ones. Tricksters. White Clowns are nice, straight men, and non-verbal. Red Clowns are zany. Circus clowns put on an outfit, have red noses, wear big shoes, and have white faces.

Day 3. Interdisciplinary Script Show and Tell:
Ruth Howard, Jumblied Theatre, host

In this session, participants talked about how they wrote scripts, and in some cases, did not write scripts, or wrote the script after the play was put together. Howard presented a succinct and brief summary of her approach. She said she writes the script; but hires someone else to direct. She begins by doing research; in the early stages, she comes up with words, bits of dialogue, pieces of music, and images. As the mountain grows, she asks: “And then what happens?” The composer interprets what she has come up with. Each project contains several disciplines. The piece also comes out of improvising. When it’s ready, that’s the time to make a video or write a script. She suggests that if an image is important, use it throughout the piece. Howard recommended charting scripts, and using journey maps. She pointed out that a writer should: “Be ware of the arc in the show and see the show visually. After this comes design of the set, props, and costumes. Finally there comes the casting of performers.

Loree Lawrence:

Lawrence was the lead artist and creator of The Gathering Space. It was a storefront art studio at the Junction, an old neighborhood in Toronto about to undergo gentrification. She was inspired by Encounters, an English art company. Lawrence says: "They use empty storefronts and mobile trailers to make art about people, community, identity, and place." Lawrence did something similar. She uses: "... text, images, maps and visual art to create dialogue at the Junction." Residents began to participate by doing charting, mapping, and leaving stories with her. People got to know more about the history of their neighborhood. The Gathering Space also became a place for people to meet and socialize. She said: "The project drew people back to me." Now she wonders about what to do with all the material and artwork created. She is considering using it in other projects: a dance performance, a documentary, and art exhibitions. She is also thinking about interviewing local shop-keepers, asking people what they would like to do, or perhaps working with the people at Lucy McCormack, a neighborhood school for the mentally challenged. Because the project has ended, Lawrence feels that the rug has been pulled-out from under her. However, the project did have some benefits: "The people have more of an identity because of the Gathering Space."

Question: Would such a storefront studio be useful in the DTES? (pf)

Judith Marcuse:

Marcuse is known for her work as a dancer, choreographer, director, and the co-founder of the new International Centre of Art for Social Change. In her work she uses video and chorographic language. Also, she: "... relies on writing in a notebook, floor patterns, and maps that are discarded after." She said that it is important to make a record by using video and text.

Marina Szjarto:

Szarto did the costume design for the DTES community play and A DTES *Romeo and Juliet*. As a costume designer, Szjarto would like to see more about costumes integrated into the script. She also mentioned that she likes to see the costume and the character develop together. To help accomplish this, she talks to the actor about what the character is like.

Comments and re-commendations from the floor:

Use Post It notes/collage/silent moving/interdisciplinary text/lots of description and stage directions/make discoveries how to work/find new ways of dealing with text/don't be locked into play mode/it's text performed/do a promenade: traveling station to station/sound and visual installation could introduce some of the themes you are going to explore in performance/ask the audience: "Can you hear me?/use surprise/use

space in a new way/create spaces for people/use found and scrounged material/use text as performer (signs? pf)/use text as a tool/project the text on a wall.

Savannah Walling:

Like Ruth Howard, Walling creates the scripts and often hires a director. As a writer she says: "You don't want to block the director." Sometimes she collaborates with a small core of writers to create a script. She tries to get feedback on later drafts. For inspiration she collects pictures and makes collages. For coherence she: ". . . creates maps, tracking each disciplinary element and key themes throughout the script." Uses storyboards. Walling suggests that writers study screenplays, musical theatre, image theatre, collaborative community play scripts, and opera libretti. These are found at libraries and 2nd hand bookstores. In moments of emotion she uses capitalization. She also strips away adjectives and adverbs from stage directions. "The goal is to create a highly refined visual, musical, heartfelt, and beautiful play."

Cathy Stubington:

Stubington is the artistic director of Runaway Moon up in Enderby, B. C. Her production: *Enough is Enough*, was a shadow play projected on a outdoor drive-in screen up in Enderby, B. C. This show inspired the DTES shadow play: *We're All In This Together*. *Enough Is Enough* was about addiction and had very few lines: 4 pages with a song and a celebratory poem. It was co-written by 3 writers: Jimmy Tait, Rosalind Williams, and Stubington. She wanted: "poetic images rather than a story." Also, she didn't want to scare the children because: "The parents were worried about sending children to the play."

Kernels of Truth was another project of Stubington's. It was to be a "Harvest Spectacle". She has made a big corncob with kernels to be inserted into it. The idea was for people to write "truths" on pieces of paper and put them in the kernels. "We will plant the corn seeds," she said, "and see what comes up." What is interesting about this project is the way text is used. "The kernels have a seed in it and a 'truth'." Examples of the truths are:

Take care of what you are given.
Be kind to all
1+1=2
Smile at everyone.
To try is better than not to try at all.
I don't know much.
Spring will come again.
Everything starts with a moment.

Day 3. Futures Discussion: led by Judith Marcuse

Marcuse opened the session by talking about her background. She was trained in dance using the classical model. She asked: "Where am I connected? To whom? What will be the future?"

Danny Vie:

Vie is a Vancouver artist who founded the Fool's Society, the Carnival Band, and The Open Air Orchestra Society. Vie says the Band supports causes and community events. To find themes Danny says: "... he works with whatever is topical at the time." An example would be the Lantern Festival at Trout Lake. (pf)

Lina de Guevara:

Guevara is originally from Chile and is the founder and artistic director of PUENTE Theatre Company of Victoria, B. C. She does transformational theatre, theatre of the oppressed, and Commedia dell'Arte. In her work she wants to build a bridge between immigrant women and the mainstream community. The play *Sisters/Strangers* is about "storytelling our lives". There were 96 people in the cast. She uses the collaborative play model for people who are not rooted.

Will Weigler:

Weigler is from the University of Victoria and is taking his doctorate there. His thesis: "How people's opinions and preconceptions can be changed or challenged by seeing a play."

At this point in the conference, Weigler "... wanted to see if there was a thread in what people had been saying. Are there any shared commonalities?"

1. Social capital: by trusting each other and joining together in Canada, we apply for funding for projects. By doing this Weigler says that we increase the social capital.
2. Community: He has a problem with the word. It is made up of different voices and has political baggage. Multitude emphasizes differences. Weigler is for agnostic pluralism' which he defines as: equally matched people who find a way to negotiate their differences while enjoying the contest.
3. Sociocracy: He notes there is a difference between consensus and consent. There are problems in how do we come to agree? If we agree, he asks, does everyone consent?" This term relates to: "How, we the people come quietly to decisions."
4. The new hybridity: defined as: "a movement by multiple agencies and a lot of different people. There is talk of the need for theatre companies to fuse or partner with agencies, organizations or

companies. Weigler finds this troublesome because of the potential for a community's creation to be co-opted by a corporate marketing agenda.

Terry Hunter:

After the DTES community play, Hunter said the participants didn't want to repeat the volunteer model, but instead wanted: employment, mentoring and training. This was followed in the Shadows Project and the Romeo and Juliet. The community play model is evolving. For Hunter, this leads to the questions:

1. How has the model changed?
2. What are the dynamics?
3. What are your methods?
4. What is your conception?

Dale Hamilton:

Hamilton has been instrumental in the collaborative play movement in Canada. She and John Oram brought the idea over to Canada from England. She has received funding from Laidlaw, Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council. She noted there are now funding categories for community engaged theatre, whereas before there wasn't. This was a change.

In doing this work, Hamilton made the observation that: "Once you do a big project, everything else that you do is compared to it. It pales to the big one if it's smaller."

(Question: Does this influence funding bodies in their decisions to award grants? pf)

She noted that a project could be compromised "... due to constraints of time, money, and different artistic goals. Hamilton remembered "... backstage being a nightmare." They had to strike the set each night because it was set up in a shopping mall. She also finds it hard to raise money for projects.

In spite of it all, Hamilton says the idea behind the work is: "To take the community spirit and do something with it."

What gives her hope for the future? Her love for John Oram, one of England's top community play directors; a memorable theatrical high at a performance in Guelph; her visit to the Jane Jacobs Foundation; and the act of taking the audience through something and they're not aware that it's theatre.

Ruth Howard:

Like many of the presenters, Howard has been doing theatre for over 20 years. She has had time to reflect on the work and offered her insights. "After you do a project," she says, "No one's going to do it again. It's time to move on." She stated that now she wants to do smaller plays. This is an indication of the stress level of larger pieces. Howard said the key ingredients in this work are:

1. Everyone is welcome
2. Art is at the centre
3. The piece will take its own form
4. Our lives are moving on

Howard believes that community plays are important for health reasons: they can unite a community. She also said there needs to be a list of the benefits from doing community plays, a need for a community play report centre, and a need for its practitioners to promote the community play idea with literature and advice. One problem with the practice is that community play-making is not being taught. And finally, the reality is that there is a danger for burnout among the organizers, facilitators, and artists. The stress level is enormous.

Rachel Van Fossen:

Fossen doesn't have a theatre company anymore because she realized that she doesn't have the time or the energy. However she but continues to participate in other people's community plays. She gave workshops up in Enderby and worked in the DTES.

Cathy Stubington:

Stubington tackled two questions put to her: How have you evolved? And: Where are you?

She recounted that the first play she did in Enderby was a puppet show, then she undertook doing a big collaborative community play. Next, was a shadow play: *Enough is Enough*; it was about addiction awareness. Then she did *By the River*. She worked with a local musician in town who wanted to give everyone the experience of music. They made the bridge the musical instrument.

Now she is doing a food project that also involves people in Kenya. "It started with an interest of mine in growing my own vegetables."

Stubington incorporates visual art in what she does. At present, Stubington is working on a corn arts festival.

In the future she wants ". . . to have more participation from people outside Enderby." She feels the same about young people and seniors. She has the urge to revisit the Anne Jellicoe model. Stubington is

interested in the water issue and wonders how it will be dealt with. And, like other community engaged artists, she want to know more about how to create “community cultural partnerships.

Judith Marcuse:

Marcuse talked about what needs to be done if art is going to be an engine for social change. There needs to be more dialogues about community art. However, these are happening in places like the Philippines, Africa, Pakistan, India, and South America. She said there is much to learn from them in regard to “social responsibility” and in “dealing with inequality”. There is a need for people in Canada to “join the convergences.” Marcus believes that there are too many people in disciplinary and departmental “silos” that must be broken down. There needs to be more art teachers in schools. In regard to the silo mentality, she said only recently was there “. . . a first meeting of education ministers and the Canada Council.”

Laurie McGauley:

Laurie McGauley was first in community development working with people in poverty. Later, she wanted to help in other ways. “I felt I needed to do something to give them their voices back.” In 1996 she did a community play about the history of the neighborhood. After seven years she found this work exhausting and felt that something was missing.

She started anew. She perceived that: “To keep an organization or a company alive is the focus.” She got funding, engaged the youth, and did a video of all the slag heaps around Sudbury. Next, she did a project about Call Centre workers. They had a story to tell: “There was an urgency about their working conditions and a need for changes.”

McGauley states very forthrightly: “I want to keep community arts going on in my community.” And she also says: “I want to make this community an interesting place to live.”

Like many of the experienced community artists, McGauley wonders: “Who will take on this work? Perhaps people in their 20s and 30s.”

Comments from the floor:

One of the problems with community plays is that there is no written code of ethics for that art form. One person asked: “What happens to the people after the play is over?” After such an intense experience there is a letdown, people feel at loose ends, a vacuum is created because the pressure is off. They often ask the organizers if they are coming back. Hence, the convincing argument: “There is a need to establish on-going workshops.”

In our society the arts provide opportunities for people to make money and to earn a living. However, there is also a political movement against the commodification of art. But there was one comment that stood out:

“The arts have an obligation to: tell the truth, speak for those who can’t or are afraid to, make society better, and inspire others to make it so.”

Judith Marcuse:

She pointed out that many hip-hop artists share some of the same problems as community play organizers. They are doing politically engaged art but find out there aren’t many places to perform. Only a few get record contracts, while many have a feeling of burnout.

Ruth Howard:

She mentioned that the stages of a person’s life enter into the work: having babies is one; illness is another. But she is convinced that it comes down to deciding to just do it.

Judith Marcuse:

Marcuse has been in the art scene a long time and undoubtedly has thought long and hard about some of the issues. She said: “The arts take people out of their normal environment.” (If this is so, what effect does this have on people who go to the shows? pf)

She also brought up the problem of evaluation of the work. How do you know whether the work is good or bad? And again, she pointed out that no one knows what others are doing. There is a problem of communication.

Will Weigler:

Weigler talked about how “Social scientists are subject to an ethical review of research subjects.” And: “At the University of Victoria the Applied Theory of Culture established a reasonable ethical standard. Community engaged theatre also needs an ethical standard.

Danny Vie:

“I became an administrator out of necessity,” Vie said. He agrees there is “serious burnout in the work”. He feels that he hasn’t got the same drive as he used to have, but he also feels privileged to do the work. In regard to the environmental problems: global warming, shortage of water, and Nuclear waste, Vie asks: “What are we doing about this as artists?” He also wants to give the people a glimmer of hope. Vie pointed out that there are different levels of activism. He’s convinced that the time might come to say: “I did that and then move on.” This is not unlike what Howard said awhile back.

Marina Szijarto:

As a costume designer in community plays, Szijarto finds that: “This kind of work is crazy; you get little sleep; and there is not time for other things.” She pointed out that “self-care is very important”. Szijarto also wants to

do more meaningful and satisfying work. She talked about: “ . . . doing smaller works with bigger connections to individuals.”

Savannah Walling:

Although Walling “Found it interesting to do the community play.” It was also a challenging and a complex balancing act between: ”personal and artistic choices”, and “community priorities and input.” In regard to her work in the community, Walling said: “You aren’t an activist to make-over a community in a certain way for someone else’s benefit, but to find ways to contribute in making a healthy community.” What is the benefit of a community play? Walling offered: “The knowledge and experience and hope are the legacy.”

Terry Hunter:

For Hunter: “The community play opened up doors for others.” The doors in this case are: earn roles in the play, work backstage, play music, take workshops, make friends, and go on to audition for other plays.

Laurie McGauley:

“In doing community art, we offer a mini-utopia.” McGauley said. She also felt that the process is very democratic and that the work is valuable.

Day 3. Developing the Next Generation:

Judith Marcuse: facilitator

“We want to break down the barriers of institutions.” Marcuse said in her introduction. She also wanted community artists “ . . . to strive for social justice and social change.” For Marcuse, the challenge is: “How to communicate to others that community art is a great tool for change.

She invited people to say a bit about their backgrounds and talk about what challenges and issues they are passionate about. Later, people wrote these down on slips of paper. These are listed below.

Ed Langevin:

He was concerned about the end of projects: “Some people go back to normal; others have a void or emptiness.”

Comment:

“How can we increase social justice in the world?”

Rachel Van Fossen

“How to make my presence in the work more visible?”

The Issues and the Challenges:

Home	Political situation in Canada
Nature	Engagement, accessibility, relevance
People coming together	Subvert colonial discourse
Build community	Trend: not into a peaceful co-existence, but into opposing groups
Getting people to work together	direction
Diversity and engagement are difficult	Sustainability and community art
O K to disagree	Music for Art
Find trust in others	Doing subversive work
Reconciling differences	How to convince others that community art is important
Working with people you don't like and they don't like you.	How to make my role a filter
Sense of loss in individual	Artists interpret
How to survive	Be an a artist first
Find something each day	Rekindling creative fire
Improve in how to be in the present.	Art creates community
Listening	Making art matter
Teaching and learning	Passing the torch
Telling stories to others	
Media and story	
Involvement vs. passive watching	
Engage in the issues	

Topic: Engagement Across Diversity

How to convince others of the validity and legitimacy of the work?

Will Weigler described a play in Seattle that cut across racial differences. A policeman shot a baby and a woman. In response, people wrote monologues; this resulted in turning down the threat level.

In one of Lisa Marie DiLiberto projects, she worked with people from 2 tribes in Somalia who were enemies. They worked together on the project and it was nominated for a prize.

Ruth Howard said that in the 80s, there was no funding for community art and it was not an academic subject. In response, she did a community play in 1990, presented the case for funding to the government and won.

Diamond tackled the problem of drug addiction with his play called *Meth*. The result was almost 100 people entered the addiction program. The play also toured western Canada.

Ethel Whitty related that one of the effects of the DTES opera *Condemned* was other people wanted to see it. At the request of B. C. Housing Coalition, it played at St. James Square in Kitsilano. The play won over another community.

Comments:

“There is anecdotal evidence that it changes lives.

People are not depressed.”

“Arts are being recognized as a tool for healing.”

“Music played to children before an operation relaxes and helps recovery.”

“A study showed that people who sing in choirs live longer than people who don’t.”

“Doing art creates change, improves health, and reduces crime.”

Ethel Whitty and Will Weigler said that artists need to assemble and take control of the statistics and evidence to back up these claims.

Terry Hunter suggested: “It’s a role for academics.” He added that artists might need to create their own template.

Ruth Howard recommended embedding statistics and evaluation in the project. “Take photos and videos,” she said, “and have people fill out questionnaires. Use these for reference and grant applications. Keep tidy numbers of attendance with names and addresses of patrons. Get a journalist to come and see the show and do a story.

“If you can,” Van Fossen said, “Use evaluation to do the work better.” Also, use it for other purposes.

Engagement Across Diversity: Questions of Trust

As a costume designer, Marina Szijarto said: “Working with my hands cuts across a lot of language barriers.”

A participant said that in a seniors’ dance workshop there wasn’t need for language, although translators were present. Another said that it’s possible to: “Work through tensions using sculpture and poetry.”

Cathy Stubington said that before the community play took place in Enderby, the native and white communities had little contact. The river also separated them. The play brought them closer together.

The Jewish community approached David Diamond to do a play on alcoholism. He said the idea was to do participatory art and research, hear the polyphonic voices, send no message, and air all the different perspectives. The result? They had huge crowds. He also complained about having to fill out long applications. He also felt that “The role that the Carnegie Centre is playing makes for a greater impact.”

Savannah Walling noted that in a play, “Something happens because acting is outside normal life.” Also, there are opportunities to meet and get to know people who you would ordinarily never meet.

Jill P. Weaving contributed to the discussion by saying to all present: “The Parks Board wants new ideas and crazy ones.”

B. C. Presenters:

Lina De Guevaria:

As a teacher and director, Lina De Guevaria has done community theatre for over 20 years. Her theatre company: PUENTE means, “bridge”, and that is what she tries to do: build a bridge between the immigrant community and the mainstream.

She finds she has to adapt to the needs of immigrant women. They don’t have a lot of time between their jobs and family commitments. She does so by carefully scheduling rehearsals, getting the women to sew banners for the set, and having them sing in a chorus. “There are many ways to make it possible to participate and practice inclusiveness,” Guevaria said. For material to use in the play, she puts out a call for stories, people’s letters, and poems. She also uses professional actors in her plays.

One of the problems immigrant women have is their isolation. The plays help break it by giving them opportunities for expression and visibility. One woman said: “I feel cold when there is no love in my heart.”

Canadian Tango is a play that explored how immigration affects relationships. Some couples gain strength from it; others get separated. When women perform in the plays, some men feel proud of their wives, while others don’t like it.

Guevaria has also done work on violence against women using forum theatre and theatre of the oppressed. People who come to the shows say: “It’s so professional.” To promote the work she gets people to write about it.

Elaine Carol: Miscellaneous Productions

Carol began by saying: “Thanks to Savannah, Terry, and Susan Gordon, our fairy godmother.”

She works with at-risk youth but also has worked with youth and elders. She offers internships and hires youth who often go on to professional work with such companies as Harbour Dance. Her company is like an art school. They sign-up for 2-6 years. Their medical is taken care of and they have an evaluator who spends many hours to advise.

Her goal is: "To do performance art that is relevant and successful." She also incorporates hip-hop. One of her shows is called: "The Cooking Show". It's intent is: "Explaining racism, stereotyping, violence, gangs, addiction, the politics of food and pleasures of cooking."

Each play undergoes a 3-5 year development period. While Carol directs, all are given credit in the co-writing. The work is: ". . . biting, witty satire, pure camp, which makes fun of stereotypes and pretensions. It's meant to be offensive." This appeals to the youth.

Carol has a tremendous commitment to her students and the work. She is aware that: "There is a need to keep everyone safe until they're ready to reveal personal history." For Carol there is "A lot of pressure on at-risk-youth to do big shows." But now she keeps them down to ". . . more manageable sizes."

She finished by saying that she doesn't sleep a lot doing this work. Also, she: ". . . spends a longer time applying for funding."

Judith Marcuse:

Marcuse, 61, is a renowned dancer, choreographer, director, and arts administrator. In her early years she explored what dance was about. Now she is exploring new places, themes and issues. She did a show in John Oliver High School called *We Can Dance*. She also has done shows on body awareness of young girls and on teen suicide.

More public performances were the Fire Project on violence and the Earth Project about social justice. She also organized the World Urban Festival. It was a huge celebration with 300 artists from around the world, 20,000 visitors and 100 hours of video. There were plays about water, poverty, AIDS, and disability.

At present she is working on the International Centre of the Arts for Social Change. She talked about the three components: Training, Networking, and Research. The intent is for the Centre to train artists in all aspects of community engaged art: (business plans, talk-backs facilitating, outreach, etc.) The Centre will also have a web network and an archive for books, publications, films and information on community engaged art.

Cathy Stubington:

Stubington talked about several of her projects that have been mentioned above. One of the important factors in her work is the commitment she has made to the community in which she lives. Her projects require much thought, hard work, and a lot of time. She said: "Culture is the way we relate to the place we live in."

Stubington posed the question: "Where do ideas come from?" For her, "Ideas come from small ideas, all have the potential to become the large thing."

After having done several projects in Enderby, Stubington wants to follow up on a new question: "In community-based art, how can collaborative art connect with visual art?"

She also brought out some of the visual props and elements from her projects: a tablecloth, vegetable ribbons, and large kernels of corn. This was an interesting moment in the conference in that people had something real to look at versus trying to catch words flying by.

Day 4. National Presenters:Dale Hamilton:

Hamilton talked about her early life growing up on a farm in Ontario, rebelling, experimenting with drugs, looking for direction, developing an interest in theatre, and traveling west.

She quoted a poem she wrote saying: "This was my mind".

Blue, blue ribbon,
Yellow moon,
Thrown shadows,
Leaves are helpless.

She went to England and there she saw Anne Jellicoe who founded Colway Theatre Trust and discovered the idea of the collaborative community play. John Oram took over as director of the Colway Theatre Trust that is now called Claque Theatre. Hamilton drove all over England with Oram. He was doing 8 plays at the same time. Oram came to Canada and did a play with Hamilton. She wanted a style of her own. Now she does smaller plays "using theatre for community development." Hamilton said she has a "flipchart disorder"; she finds that ideas disappear, so she uses paper to write on. She said her urge to "Take it to the streets." led to a parting of the ways with Oram. She wants to do performances outdoors at stations along the way, in a circle. They take

place in the landscape or streetscape. She wants to focus more on the story. She likes the idea of blurring the line between performer and audience member. Recently, she has: “Had an invitation from the Jane Jacobs Foundation to infuse some theatricality into that organization.”

Hamilton offered some cautions in creating a community play. There is a “. . . need to take into account the flavor of the neighborhood,” by taking community soundings and doing research. If the play is message driven, make it subtle. She said the playwright has to be flexible and responsible to the community. Have a number of entry points. For Hamilton, “Collaborative work sometimes feels lonely. People disappear or are indifferent.”

Her other complaints? “Grant writing, stress, greed confusion of the mind, imposition, hate market, judging, frantic pace, fear, too much me on the computer.”

Laurie McGauley:

She comes from the mining town of Sudbury and has: “. . . sulphur in the blood; gold dust in my hair.” As a community artist, she wants: “To give a voice to those who aren’t being heard.”

In Sudbury she did a project to protect a small green space. She starts with a theme. After exploration exercises, the project took shape. It was 450 painted hands on wood mounted on a chain-link fence; the hands symbolized the community. However, because of vandalism the hands were moved to the library.

Another project was about Call Centres: *Get a Real Job*. Here, McGauley worked with the workers, heard how oppressive the work was. As McGauley said: “Non-union centres have archaic dress codes: no heels over 1 ½”. Workers also have to stand the entire shift, accept low wages, and endure tyrannical bosses because they have no protection.” Also, some people on the line blew megaphones into the phone that hurt their ears.

McGauley also does environment projects with youth. The projects are annual, taking place during summer festivals. Some projects involve working with young parents.

Ruth Howard:

Howard did a project called *Transitions*. It was launched to discover how to sustain what her company, Jumbles, was doing. There was a company retreat with a facilitator. They came up with two symbols: pebbles and a spider plant. The pebbles stood for “all the unfinished desires and wants about projects.”

Two offshoot projects were: Mabelle Arts: a group Somali ladies doing sewing and embroidery. Youth interns also helped, and Arts4All, an all-players theatre troop.

Howard mentioned a new production to take place at Camp Nivelles, a Jewish socialist community established in the 1920s. The Jewish Communist Party founded the community; it welcomed people and advocated for social justice. They also did survival theatre there. Howard described a new residency program in Scarborough. There is a neighborhood with cheap motels that are rented by the hour. It's a home and hangout for drug dealers. But it's also a place for refugees. This is an at-risk neighborhood and needs help. Howard got funding to do a project, a simple handicraft activity. To come up with an idea she says: ". . . to start with a place and discover what the place leaves out." Howard recommends coming to funders ". . . in a very up front way. It takes years to develop a project and there are lots of questions to answer. Have to charge fees, and need to pay the artists, trainers, mentors, and field supervisor. Be determined to do a good job and plan to sustain it." Howard says that it's easier to get funding in Ontario if you pay youths and give mentoring and training. Howard also pointed out that there is a gap in the leadership between senior and emerging artists. For Howard, artists: "Need to have a strong arts practice, the ability to do paperwork, and the skill to administer the grant."

Rachel Van Fossen:

Van Fossen opened by saying: "I'm going to have separation anxiety after the conference." The symposium up to this time had been an intense 4 days, with many ideas to ponder and discussions to digest. She also described herself as: "An artist in progress."

In her look at community-engaged work versus independent work, Van Fossen said: "I always choose to be engaged, in fact, I always need to engage in something."

One aspect of the work that bothers Van Fossen is: "I'm interested in, bothered by, invisibility in doing community-engaged work." She also asks: "Where am I in the work?"

A question that she found perplexing was: "How can a community play represent a community? Be a representation of a community."

Another concern of Van Fossen was the "Performance of multiple contradictory identities." by herself and others.

Van Fossen got a foundation grant to study Street theatre in India. She thought that she would decide beforehand: “What I’m going to learn.” And “What I’m not going to learn.” She said: “What arrogance!” She was won over and excited by the street-theatre form.” She felt that: “It cut directly to what was relevant to people’s lives.” Now, she is also incorporating written text into live performance.

She mentioned doing a short performance of *Consent and Marriage*, where the characters perform each other and explore marriage arrangements. She could also see using puppets that are: “. . . larger than life, speaking through a megaphone, performing each other’s ancestors

Judith Marcuse:

“There is street theatre in other places, too.” Marcuse said. “In Jamaica they perform on a platform on a big truck.” It is agitprop. “They are wonderful forms, there are low expectations. Bigotry! Get out of the way!” Collaboration and respect come together.

Day 4. The Next Steps:

Savannah Walling introduced several ideas in regard to doing something different from the community play. One was the possibility of doing a cross-Canada collaborative community play. Then there was a go-around in which participants offered an image or a phrase to express their conception of what the next step might be.

- A community play resource centre
- Building on relationships
- Documentation of the work
- Dissemination of information
- Succession, passing on the torch to others
- Need for community education about people with physical disabilities and special needs. Advocates are also needed.
- Smaller more manageable projects, need for deeper connections, big and small.
- Healthy ecology in big and small projects.
- Continue this practice
- Exchange program between artists, villages, etc.
- Artists as community participants
- Web site support with manager enables people to stay connected. A university to manage the site.
- Access for the disabled and the hearing impaired. (At workshops, rehearsals, and performances, pf)

- Need for internships. Emerging artists who have a body of work need to step up. It's a type of intervention
- Making soundtracks of the projects.
- A national project with/and a common message or theme.
- Coalition of companies/artists who are promoted nationally
- Need to break down silos between educational institutions and political sides
- Opening up spaces where authentic dialogue can happen.
- What's happening internationally? Need a place on the net, library, or university.
- Connections: learning from global perspectives
- Mixing age groups, cross-fertilization
- Accessibility for audiences to find out.
- Opening up spaces for authentic dialogue and multiple voices
- Develop placements for students
- Use of different visual arts
- In developing a project, involve designers up front
- Dialogue with funders
- Collaborations with mainstream theatre companies
- More sophisticated evaluations
- Full spectrum of inter-generations
- Integrating and forming art groups into other disciplines
- True artistic collaboration with community
- Being able to be artists
- Less pressure to do other work
- Mould
- Something suspect, perceptions
- Success, struggle
- More to do with . . . outside perception
- Lose yourself
- Intellectual brand of artist
- Seductive
- Clarify artistic success
- Value of the artist
- Legitimize this form of art
- Sustainability advocacy
- Support to the participants?
- Depression sets in with the post-production blues
- Jane's Walk accessible
- Framework for national project
- Strategies CAA
- Community arts
- Animation
- Include people who can influence the next step

- History of the work needed to increase understanding
- Great to have everyone here
- Emerging artists
- Need artist training, doing the actual work
- Hands on facilitating
- Basic skills, facilitating dialogue
- Documentation/dissemination
- Educate the critics
- Language of the work
- Canadian form, critical accessible language
- Interest in writing/ how are you doing?
- Like the idea of the “next step”
- The group is getting bigger
- An entire symposium on the “next step”
- Break down silos
- Clearly define roles of artist and community
- How to sustain participant’s development
- Mentoring in different cultural communities
- Continued support of community participants
- Lobby (?) politicians
- Long term funding
- Venues for performance
- Dissenting view: Elwin said: “With community gardens, TV, radio, and theatre, no one gets involved in community anymore. People watch T V and stay home.”
- Community theatre: stories, variety, involve First Nations
- Stories told for the first time
- Interwoven
- Whole Downtown Eastside, old stories about Chinatown, Japan town
- Refreshing, I heard the language (Chinese?) on stage, in the community centre
- Issues: Chinese, Blacks, Japanese
- Preconceived idea what it’s about
- Fabulous review

Danny Vie:

Vie said that there is a tremendous resource here at the conference. But he is also feeling the weight, the blood sweat and tears that go into this work. He would like to connect training with the conference so that people can learn facilitating skills. He said: “People are not sharing beauty and joy of work. They are focused more on production.” He said that the value of the work is that it allows people to connect. The symposium brought about a new understanding of what this work is about. He felt that community engaged theatre’s struggle is marvelous, and that

we need to get more attention and exposure. He wants to? “Showcase the success! Showcase the films! Let the world know!

This report has described what happened at the symposium: the circumstances, the venues, the presenters, the presentations, and hopes for the future. For this writer, being a part of the DTES and rapporteur for the conference, I would like to summarize some of the important aspects of the event in regard to being applicable for the DTES.

- 1 A need for training and mentoring artists in the way of bursaries, and scholarships.
- 2 A need for a range of new venues that are properly equipped, accessible, and affordable for DTES productions.
- 3 A book about plays, events, artwork, exhibits, etc. that have been done in the DTES and other inner cities.
- 4 A manual describing working methods, principles, practices that are useful and effective for community artists working in the inner city.
- 5 A close look at remuneration for all participants in projects.
- 6 A need for local community artists to meet regularly in order to share knowledge, practices, funding, etc.
- 7 A resource exchange whereby artists can share, loan, or rent equipment to each other. Perhaps an Internet resource centre.
- 8 Specific funding for artists to do small projects.
- 9 A set of ethical guidelines for doing community art.
- 10 A description of community art models that could be adapted for the DTES community.
- 11 New methods to evoke ideas for community art projects from the residents that they will execute with the help of professionals.
- 12 Make the community aware that there is a difference between an artist facilitating a project and another originating a project. If the idea comes from an artist, it may seem like it's imposed, especially if the artist also facilitates it. However, if the idea originates with the community, it is more likely to have the residents' support, an important factor in doing any community art.

- 13 An awareness of process and product. In measuring the success of a project, it may be the process that is much more important than the product. There needs to be ways of measuring both.
- 14 There are so many empty buildings in the DTES that could be utilized for performance spaces, galleries, studios, workshops, and living spaces for artists. The question is: How can we make them available for those uses?
- 15 Establish a centre for artists to come, share, and report.
- 16 Support for the disabled who want to participate.
- 17 What are the benefits from doing a community art project in the DTES? Let the participants speak who took part in *Romeo and Juliet*.
 - Some were reminded who they were and what their purpose in life was.
 - The community was strengthened with people developing friendships and organizations forming partnerships.
 - People had fun and gained self-respect.
 - Participants learned to negotiate in small groups and to listen to others.
 - They acquired new skills in acting.
 - People had the opportunity to speak about their own lives and the issues facing the neighborhood.
 - A few used this experience as a stepping-stone to do other theatre work.
 - People had the opportunity to learn about the history of their neighborhood.

And there are other benefits to the community: more people become interested in the arts, there is a vibrancy in the neighborhood when art projects are taking place, honorariums to participants help economically, and people develop pride in their neighborhood.

Reflections on Art in an Ailing Neighborhood:

Is everyone is doing their part? Artists like to work at their craft, especially if they get paid for it. They take on community art projects and usually do more work than is required. It's sad to say but this can lead to burnout. Indeed, artists are the greatest supporters and benefactors of the arts in a society.

However, the owners of the empty, derelict buildings in the DTES do not do their fair share in making the neighborhood hospitable. They have contributed to its demise by their neglect and refusal to fix their ugly buildings. They do not try to rent or lease them, but hold on to them for future capital

gains. They also do not participate in the community's events or activities. They are essentially absentee landlords and do nothing for the community. The previous city councils have also let this appalling situation develop and fester. These once beautiful building with so much character, are decaying and rotting. Yes, these empty buildings have, more than anything, contributed to the demise of the DTES. It's high time the owners are brought to task. The city needs to take the bull by the horns and issue an ultimatum: "Mr. Landlord, either fix your building and get it rented by this date, or sell it to someone who will." The city puts no pressure on these owners. It's almost as if the owners of commercial, private property are exempt from the moral responsibility to preserve and protect what they own. For shame! If anyone owns a home in Vancouver and they let their yard become a garbage dump, the neighbors won't put up with it, and neither will the city. It will clean up the property and bill the owner. Why isn't the same principle applied to the owners of the derelict buildings in the DTES?

As a playwright, former sculptor, and constant drawer, I love and support all the arts. However, I also feel that this ailing neighborhood, where many suffer from poverty, drug addiction, mental illness, alcoholism, and unhealthy living conditions, needs a healthy dose of medicine in the way of better economic support for people, recovery programs, treatment centers, and social housing. There is a danger here in using the arts as a poultice, not to cure, but to cover-up the lack of will to really address the dire problems in the DTES? Again, a community play may draw attention to the ills plaguing the DTES, and the participants may get a pat on the back for doing a good job, but it needs to result in action on the part of politicians, most of whom--sad to say--do not even come to community plays! That is why the work needs to be seen by people in the wider community. Only they can pressure city hall to get on the ball and do something. The fact of the matter is DTES residents do not have enough clout by themselves.

Again, if the arts are to be vehicles of social change, they not only have to have a strong message, but they also must be appealing and entertaining for the audience. Good production values also help. As they say the shows need to create a buzz to make people want to go see it.

At the symposium many of the artists and participants gave many suggestions on how to encourage and promote community play-making. Some other considerations I suggest are:

- i. The need for city council to pass by-laws that protect the neighborhood. Artistic endeavors and the presence of artists make a neighborhood appealing. Realtors, property owners, and buyers take advantage of the situation. They contribute to a gentrification that excludes and forces out residents and the artists them selves. Market forces will destroy this neighborhood if the City does not step in and prevent it. It's that simple.

- ii. Empty storefronts make wonderful studio spaces, workshops, small theatres, and galleries. The many empty buildings literally scream out for occupation. How can they be opened up? The city needs to find new ways to bring the empty buildings to life. Perhaps by relaxing some of the by-laws, or by promoting some form of ownership mechanism whereby the residents-to-be, who may also be artists, work at renovating the building and use their rent money to pay down the mortgage. Their hours of work would count as so many dollars towards home ownership. A business on the ground floor could also help pay down the mortgage instead of paying rent. Of course such a project will require federal government assistance.
- iii. Finally, as an artist who has participated in many events in the DTES, I can say that this work has made me aware of the many problems that plague the neighborhood. To rehabilitate this neighborhood is no easy task. However, I think a vision for the future or a plan for the neighborhood is needed to get everyone focused on what people want. Maybe the time has come for artists to lend a hand in developing and articulating this plan. If it's good, maybe the powers that be, namely the city, developers, and businessmen, will climb aboard and help bring it to fruition.

This report has talked about the work of the Vancouver Moving Theatre in the DTES, given an example of a community play, summarized the presentations of practitioners of the art form, provided a list of the benefits, listed some of the needs of community play practitioners, and stated several new directions which this art form can take. Finally, during the symposium one person made the comment that captures the essence of what art is about and of what value community plays have:

“The arts have an obligation: to tell the truth, to speak for those who can’t or are afraid to, to make society better, and to inspire others to make it so.”

The End