

# Moments of Beauty Moments of Grace



building community in the Downtown Eastside

**MOMENTS OF BEAUTY/ MOMENTS OF GRACE:  
Building Community in the Downtown Eastside**

[Editor's Note]:

[ In the final weeks leading up to the performance of the *Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*, a group of five UBC applied ethnomusicology students attended rehearsals, met with producers and interviewed performers and participants in an effort to document the preparation, performance and affect of seven productions made, produced and performed by members of the Downtown Eastside Community. The following illustrated essay is a labour of love and the result of several collaborative efforts to capture the spirit of these productions and the people who were so actively and passionately involved in them. ]\*

*\*[Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from individuals are taken from personal interviews conducted by UBC students during the period between October 19, 2009, and November 25, 2009]*

As the sun begins to set on another chilly October afternoon, the brightly painted Vancouver Russian Hall stands out, defiant against the growing darkness. On a short stretch of Campbell Street just off of East Hastings, the once grey building has recently been adorned with a mural of beautifully painted cultural and musical references to Vancouver's early Russian Immigrant Community. Just outside the hall's doors, a glass display holds carefully crafted posters for forthcoming Community Productions while a custom wheelchair accessibility ramp built along the staircase gestures towards a simple fact: all are welcome within these walls.

The welcoming atmosphere extends within the doors of the hall, as one finds a small lobby where a wide table is generously stocked with every imaginable flavour of tea and accented with sugar, honey, milk and cream; disposable cups are neatly labelled in bright red marker with the names of their owners and amidst the myriad of sounds of singing and stage direction, laughter and conversation, sighs of frustration and the occasional tear, the drip, drip, drip of freshly brewed coffee is both constant and necessary. Such is the scene at the latest rehearsal for the Downtown East Side Music Theatre Showcase. As night begins to fall, the colour, energy and enthusiasm of the community outside slowly begins to find its way indoors as one by one a diverse and eclectic cast of local residents and visiting professionals enter through the hall's doors, place their bags and baggage aside and prepare themselves for a night's work. Conversation is pleasant and casual as familiar faces tell old jokes, old friends reconnect and one and all eagerly anticipate the forthcoming performance. Observing the

cosiness and familiarity of some members of the group, one cannot help but sense that this is not just a singular cast, but an extension of a larger community – a family which was forged through years of collaboration on different projects and tempered by all the hardships, challenges and triumphs that came in between.

*“Part way through a production, there's a place where it seems like it's going to fall apart... but then it somehow goes beyond that. After we did the community play, I just cried for about an hour after it happened because of the power and the beauty and the miracle of what took place in all its imperfect, miraculous beauty- and I wondered... I thought at that moment I could die- it would be okay if I died at that moment because I could feel like I had done a good job in my life.” – Savannah Walling*

As the artistic director of Vancouver Moving Theatre (henceforth VMT), Savannah Walling has been present for many of the triumphs and challenges of each of the seven community productions since *I Love the Downtown Eastside* was first performed in 2002. The VMT later co-produced *In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play* in 2003 and has produced two widely diverse community plays since. Although these productions have ranged dramatically in subject, tone and artistic medium, from the comically driven *Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet* to the emotionally demanding and technically challenging shadow play *We're all in this Together*, each has maintained a distinct focus on the issues, ideas and people of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (henceforth

DTES). Because of her various roles in producing, writing and performing in several different productions, Savannah possesses a unique perspective on each production's effect in building community and their role in providing a positive, challenging and rewarding creative outlet for community members. In discussing VMT's artistic approach Savannah advocates the importance of being open to exploring difficult subjects in a variety of ways:

*"I don't believe in a master formula or a silver bullet solution (to confronting our community's challenges). Each collaborative journey is unique. We develop the artistic scaffolding and creative process through dialogue with our producing partners, artist teams and community. Together we evolve a guiding frame and ground rules: A foundation understood, shaped and respected by all the players; A foundation that works for this theme, this group of artists and collection of disciplines- this community, this time and this place."*

A veteran of collaborative productions, what Savannah finds most important in Community Theatre is acknowledging the power of each individual's efforts: "To build healthy communities we are all needed.... we each take the small steps we know how to take in creating art that engages people from our community, excites us and challenges negative stereotypes."

An artist trained in dance, mime and music, Savannah herself is a formidable woman in her accomplishments, creative energy and talent for producing artistically effective and socially meaningful productions developed in a creative



*Savannah Walling, Artistic Director, VMT*  
*Photograph by Katherine Fleitas*

partnership with her husband, VMT's Executive Director, Terry Hunter. In conversing with her it becomes clear that perseverance, collaborative skills, and a knack for drawing the most out of each experience have been essential tools in overcoming some of the challenges she has faced. Even the most basic of inquiries into her ideas and opinions are met with well articulated and thoughtful responses. When asked what words might describe her own experience in the community productions, Savannah's creative and conscientious nature immediately found its way to the surface; where others might have answered in much more general terms, Savannah grasped her head, closed her eyes in concentration and offered an inventive and wonderfully poignant response, describing her experience as akin to "a mule climbing Mount Everest.... a heavily laden ant slowly inching along.... and an octopus juggling a thousand different tasks." Having to constantly deal with production concerns such as funding and logistics as well as the artistic, cultural and intrapersonal nuances of a community production, Savannah often found herself overwhelmed by her experiences,

but makes it clear that these challenges were consistently rewarded by what she called “Moments of Beauty and Moments of Grace.”

*"In the midst of all the challenges there are moments of grace, just moments of beauty, moments of clarity, moments of... all sorts of people joined together in a common effort- working to achieve.... and the beauty of sometimes seeing people in a state of full commitment where they're not afraid to let who they are shine through....the beauty of the spirits of all these different individuals, just for a moment uncluttered by masks or fear."-Savannah Walling*

This bittersweet journey through the productions describes the experience of many of the community performers as they have confronted and overcome personal challenges through artistic expression. These powerful moments of beauty and grace have drawn performers back to the stage time and time again, and are a principle reason why these productions have played such a crucial role in the lives of so many community members.

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An inspiring and positive spirit, Sue Blue is quick to laugh, unafraid to cry and determined to end each conversation on a positive note. She holds distinction as the unofficial chef of each of the productions she has been involved in, bringing fresh bannock and homemade jam for the short breaks in between long rehearsal sessions. The warm bannock and tangy jam mirror Sue’s pleasant disposition as she typically

greet everyone she meets with a warm hug, a snappy joke, an infectious laugh and a bright smile.



**Sue Blue, Castmember of The DTES Community Play and We're All in This Together**  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Meetings with Sue Blue are conducted with relative informality, but she makes it abundantly clear that she holds no qualms in talking about the challenges and triumphs which have occurred in her life. “I have to learn who the hell I am,” she suggests in a serious tone that contrasts with her usual playfulness, “that’s the only way I’ll ever learn how to break the cycle”. This notion of breaking cycles of violence, addiction and social injustice which are passed on with each successive generation is a topic which weighs heavily on Sue Blue’s mind and never strays far from her thoughts. Her own experiences growing up outside the DTES were often characterized by abusive relationships with parents and legal guardians at home, clergy and school teachers at residential schools and then with men later on in her life. This difficult history, in part, coincided with periods of substance abuse and the emergence of similar hardships for her children. Despite the prevalence of these ongoing cycles



of pain and hardship, Sue Blue nevertheless searches for signs of hope in the future: “I tell my boys don’t you ever hit a woman. I’ll disown you. My mom and dad used to fight, my aunts or whatever, everybody fought. And that’s the cycle I’d like to break...”

Nine years ago, Sue Blue arrived in the DTES and soon found herself taking part in a variety of community events, plays, and crafts centred at the Carnegie Community Centre as a positive means of staying busy while providing her with opportunities to further her aforementioned goals of finding herself and breaking destructive cycles: “I like it because I have found new friends and family. It’s something to get up for and look forward to.” In developing these relationships while participating in community plays and musicals, Sue also finds herself confronting her own personal challenges in a safe and welcoming environment which ultimately proves to be therapeutic:

*“I’m a doll at the Carnegie! ...People around here...They think I’m one of the leaders. I don’t call myself a leader. When they tell you you’re dumb, stupid and all this, you never become a leader. But in my own ways I know that people here see me and I’m higher than that...”*

Upon hearing this comment from Sue Blue it became quite apparent that the memories of life’s trials are not taboo subjects for her to broach- instead it seemed to be much more of a familiar, therapeutic process. “If something’s hurting you,” she says, “don’t keep it inside; talk about it with somebody or it will make you sick. Walk, or go see friends or get a hobby. I can talk all night...Because people [involved in the

productions] will listen...And sometimes I’m hurting a lot, or something affects me and I say, hey how do you feel today? Aahhh.. I feel rotten-[and I say] Me too! Ahhh...”

Nurturing open and compassionate dialogue between individuals is something which Sue Blue truly embraces as it appears to be an effective way for her to bridge the ideas of finding her own identity, understanding destructive cycles and tackling any challenges she might face in the future. Sue Blue’s positive response to these experiences prompts her to insist that what makes her most sad living in the DTES is when nobody listens to the people who truly need listening to.

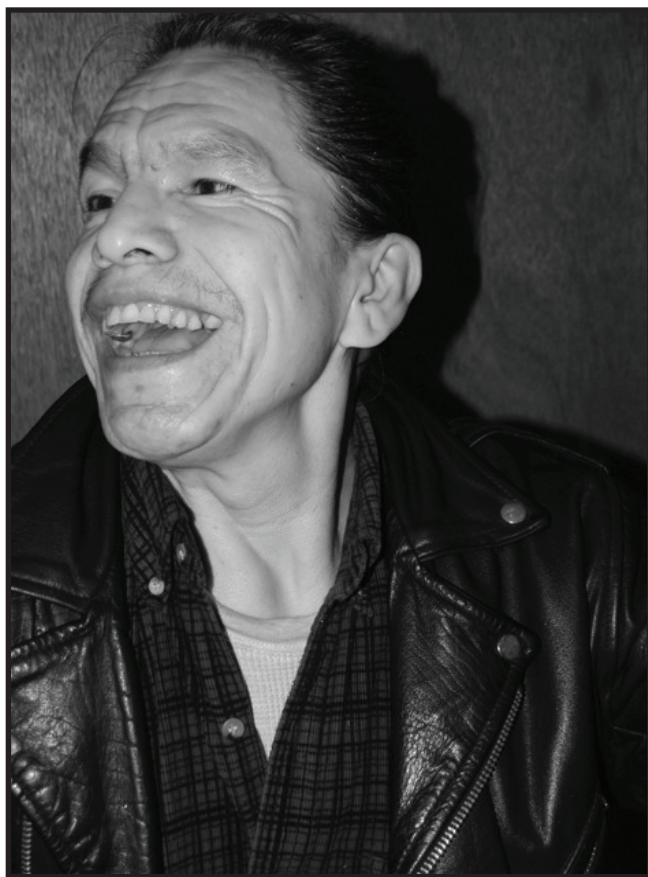
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When first meeting Stephen Lytton, one is immediately drawn to his energy, kindness, and positive outlook on life. As a well-respected senior community member, Stephen emphasizes the importance of “patience, drive, heart, passion, compassion, [and] understanding” within the DTES community.

To further the awareness of the different stories in the DTES community, Stephen has been involved in many productions, including: *The Downtown Eastside Community Play*, *We’re All in This Together*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Crime in a World Class City*. Stephen has two major purposes in his participation in these productions: to “share the reality of homelessness and poverty in the DTES... [and] shed light on the beauty of community” of the Vancouver Eastside.

Diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at a young age, Stephen rose above his disability through perseverance and working with CP the best he knew how. Stephen’s struggle with CP has given

him a unique and compassionate perspective on the plights of addicts in the DTES community. “Those who are struggling with addiction encourage me more than I encourage them,” Stephen shares, “They struggle daily in their plight... [but] they strive forward. They have taught me about true heroism... Whether I’m there or not they are there the next day and they carry on.” Stephen truly believes that there is beauty to be found in the lives of the addicted and the homeless, through their daily striving and strength in dealing with their troubles.



**Stephen Lytton, Cast Member of The Downtown Eastside Community Play, We’re All in This Together, Crime and Punishment, and Crime in a World Class City**  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Stephen’s serious and heartfelt love and compassion for the DTES community extends to the audience of the DTES theatre productions.

“When we’re talking about addictions, we are talking about real lives and putting people’s struggles out there. You are taking the chance of opening up wounds that you may not be able to close for people in our production or for audience members... I must encourage those who participate in this kind of theatre to take it seriously...if you are going to open up a can of worms you have to be accountable for that.”

As a community leader and performing artist, Stephen Lytton believes that the key to artistic expression is ebb and flow – to work with the emotions that are present both on stage and in the audience. Treating personal struggles of DTES community members with respect and dignity, no matter how dark or painful, are crucial in Stephen’s mind to resolving and strengthening the DTES community at its core.

*“We’ve got to educate the world about what a great city this is but we have to take care of our own backyard and deal with issues of addiction, homelessness, poverty, local, national and provincial government. This is the way the community can begin building bridges and making a difference.” – Stephen Lytton*

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To Tom Quirk, theatre is not only an outlet for artistic expression, but was once the one thing that saved his life.

Tom’s involvement with VMT and musical theatre began in 2004, when he performed as both singer and actor. Coming out of active addiction, Tom continued his involvement in the DTES arts community with theatre. “For my

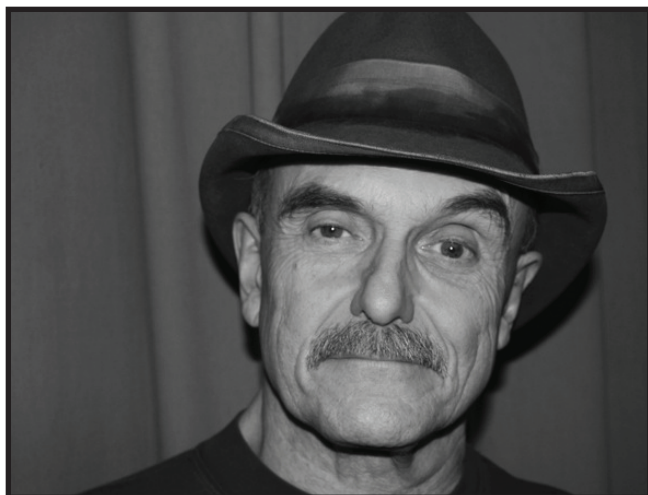


***Top** (from left to right): Jay Hamburger, Neil Weisensel, and Steven Lytton during rehearsal.  
**Left:** Sue Blue runs through her lines once more on stage.*





survival and sustained recovery today I can thank my continuing part in the DTES community.” He had roles in VMT's *We're All in This Together*, the remounted production at the Firehall Arts Centre of *The Carnegie Opera* in 2007 and has participated in most every workshop and training session offered by VMT since 2004. The accessibility to these workshops and training sessions created opportunities for Tom to improve his performance and communication skills and to discover new heights as an actor and singer. He was happy to have a personal mention in the Georgia Straight for *We're All in This Together* in a 2007 review.



*Tom Quirk, cast member of We're All In This Together*  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Musical theatre performances Tom has video-documented for VMT include *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet* in 2008 and the 2009 remounted production of *East End Blues and All that Jazz*. Outside of theatre productions, Tom is also active in DTES arts, and music and community outreach. He made a 22 minute documentary on Gallery Gachet's homeless artist program, "Out Of the Rain", featuring intimate video-footage with artists as they created and talked about their art.

For Tom, it is about getting back to the basics of life. Tom's passion for theatre and the arts in the DTES has given him exposure to resources that could help him with his photography and film work, and creates an avenue for him to give back to the core community.

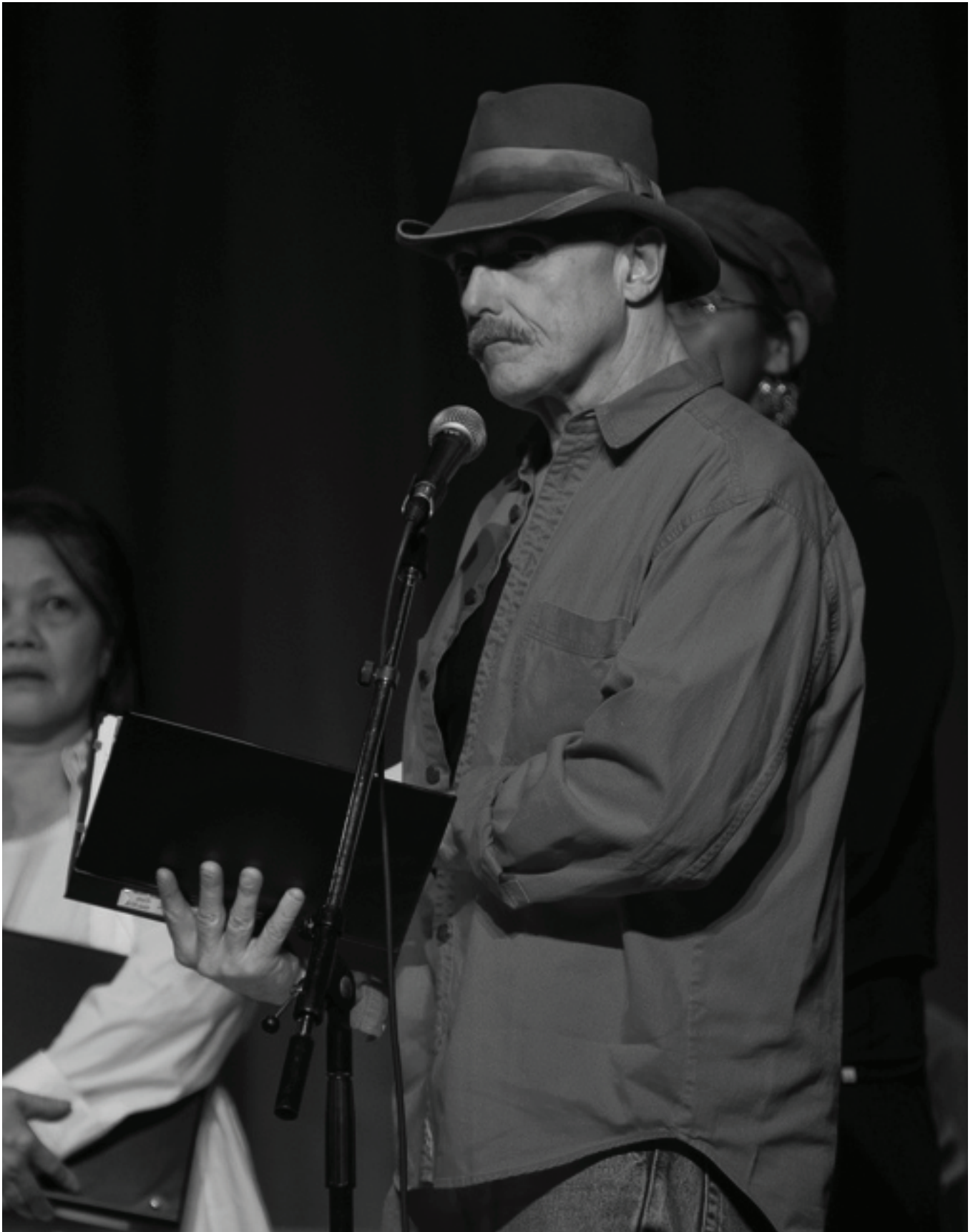
Tom's time with VMT and his friendships with Terry and Savannah have changed his life. "Terry and Savannah's compassion and genuine care has inspired us all! My experience with them has stimulated further growth and my involvement with DTES arts and affairs has enriched and opened my life." Today, Tom is working on innovative ways of partnering with some of the new presences in the DTES such as SFU and new emerging gallery spaces supporting the core community, indigenous and homeless artists.

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On the surface, Jim Sands seems like an intimidating man. At 6'2" with a larger build, he towers above most of the performers. But at Jim's warm, friendly smile, all previous fears melt away. After introducing himself for the interview, Jim takes his seat, rests his hands on the table, laces his fingers, and smiles.

As a long-time resident Vancouver (on the border between Strathcona and East Vancouver) Jim initially had trouble finding a sense of belonging within his community. The search from community is a key theme which resonates throughout the interview, and is one of the key motivations behind Jim's involvement with the DTES theatre.

Jim first heard about VMT in 2003 during a conference workshop on the effects of theatre in rural communities. "I got back and I was really



*Above: Tom Quirk listens to Neil Weisensel's suggestions during rehearsal.*

excited," Jim says. After contacting VMT, Jim began his journey as a guitar player in *The Downtown Eastside Community Play*. "I think the biggest part of the process for me [was] it really set up a situation of interdependence where my chord was the cue for the person halfway across the hall. I had additional responsibility to get it right because other people were counting on me to get it right." For Jim, the union of different DTES voices and mutual trust required for a successful performance creates a sense of belonging and fulfillment for participants, and built a community with each production.



**Jim Sands, musician with *In the Heart of a City* and *We're All In This Together*; Played the role of "Hansel" in VMT's *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet***  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Through his involvement in VMT and VMT-sponsored performance-building workshops, Jim has honed his writing and performance skills. Jim wrote the character of Hansel into *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet*, "a clownish, four year old German boy [who]... was actually a really powerful symbol of loneliness." To Jim, the character Hansel became a "really important vehicle for opening up discussion about isolation" in the DTES.

Jim's commitment to art in the Vancouver Eastside is strengthened by the supportive and symbiotic relationship he has with the DTES community. The Vancouver Eastside acts as both muse and canvas for Jim's exploration of the daily struggles that too many residents of the DTES face: homelessness, addiction, and poverty. He recently gave up a full-time position working for a non-profit organization, and holds a part-time job to make time for his art and to raise awareness of issues in the DTES. Jim believes the easily sensationalized stories of the DTES are only half-truths. The creative and generative aspects of the DTES, including the vibrant arts community, are only beginning to gain momentum and media attention they deserve.

Jim's journey as a performing artist in the DTES has only begun. Just as he looks forward to spreading the heavy but beautiful stories of the community, so too does the community look forward to watching the growth of Jim Sands.

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Gena Thompson, a fiery woman with a powerful voice, became involved with the DTES community in 2001. Her casual demeanour belies an intense personal strength in advocating for the DTES. Though she began as an anonymous volunteer at the Carnegie Centre, Gena was soon elected to the Carnegie Centre Board of Directors as her passion with the DTES grew. Gena's natural talent for the arts drove and inspired her contributions to the DTES arts community: her poetry was published in *The Return of the Downtown Eastside Poets* and Vancouver's *Poetry in Transit*; her photography was exhibited at the Gallery Gachet in November



2009.

Gena's real passion, however, is musical theatre. Her journey with musical theatre began when she volunteered to perform *In The Heart of a City*. At the time Gena had recently moved to the DTES after overcoming a lifelong struggle with depression. She remembers it as "the first time I was... free to look after myself, and do what I wanted to do." Although rehearsals were demanding, the exhilarating and powerful performances empowered and validated her independence. Gena stuck with theatre after that, and has played in three DTES theatre productions since then.



**Gena Thompson, Cast Member of *In The Heart of a City*,  
*Condemned*, *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet***  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

"I just love the work," Gena says simply. "It feels like you've accomplished something at the end, when everyone is raving about [the performance] and everyone knows their part." The personal growth and sense of fulfillment Gena experiences in the journey through each production draws her back to theatre time and time again. "In theatre the main thing for me would just be of growth and just opportunity," she says, discussing how DTES theatre creates a privileged space for any DTES resident to

become involved with professional-level art.

Growth in DTES theatre productions is not restricted to personal development, as participants form close friendships throughout the course of the play. "We're inclusive, we're part of the community," Gena says. Although the content of each play forces participants to confront heavy, emotional issues, and personality and artistic conflicts arise all the time, by the end of each performance the participants have formed a close tight-knit community. "At the end," Gena smiles slightly, "you forgive people their idiosyncrasies." Friendships formed on stage extend outside of the performance hall, where theatre participants greet each other merrily on the streets and often meet up for lunches or coffee.

Gena has found her voice through an amazing journey of artistic and personal growth in theatre. In choirs before participating in DTES theatre, Gena remembers, "I would stop singing and apologize...for drowning everyone out." Now her voice rings out clear and unapologetically. "The more I learn, the more opportunity it creates," Gena says. From being a novice at theatre before the DTES theatre productions, Gena now works closely with Gina Bastone (the director of *A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet*) on Vancouver theatre projects. "Now I'd love to make a living in theatre," Gena confesses. She has a community network in the DTES and has formed many friendships with professionals who worked on the DTES theatre productions.

With DTES theatre productions focusing on the political, emotional, and human aspects of DTES, Gena finds the potential impact of these productions on Vancouver incredibly exciting. To Gena, DTES theatre productions





*Top: Jim Sands as his character Hansel from A  
Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet.*

*Right: Gena Thompson performs a song from  
Condemned.*



are "a way of getting the message out, without preaching" to raise public awareness about urgent and misunderstood issues facing the DTES community.

"People are tired of rallies and activists... we need to hear from artists now," Gena says.

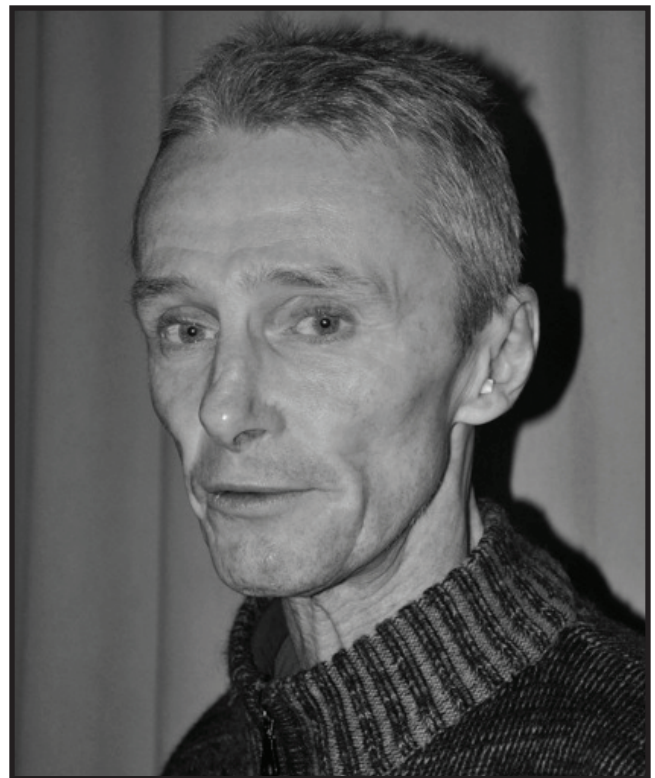
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To Andy Kostynuik, real art stems from bone-deep honesty—a fearless honesty which is both conscious and rebellious of social norms, and unafraid to explore even the darkest taboos. When discussing artistry in the DTES, Andy throws his arms in the air and leans forwards, anger and passion battling through his trembling voice. He advocates for a fearless type of theatre, one that does not shrink from the darkness present within the DTES community, and does not emphasize a simple sterile optimism. To Andy, the DTES "is a bloody tough neighbourhood. And to depict it as anything else is, I think, sort of shameful."

Invited in 2001 by the late John Juliani to participate in the *I Love the Downtown Eastside* production, Andy was thrilled at the chance to work with his friends and fellow artists from the DTES. As a Vancouver-based semi-professional musician, Andy was eager to express his fierce politically-incorrect perspective on issues facing the DTES. The collaborative efforts between Andy and the other musicians to write songs and lyrics for the production were well-rewarded. "The music was hot," Andy notes with a touch of pride.

Though Andy keeps to himself during rehearsals, when given the chance to speak, words pour from his mouth like water from a cracked dam. "It's nice to get this off my chest,"

Andy confesses, "because I carry this stuff with me." He begins with his biography—love, pain, and sorrow exposed in his voice as he speaks of his mother and brother and the challenges he faced growing up. But it was his mother, a seasoned Vancouver music teacher of 50 years, who inspired Andy's love of music and singing. In his 43-year career in music, Andy has written close to 400 songs, published 2 CDs, and played at countless festivals, clubs, and bars. His skill with the guitar and his sorrowful tenor voice keep Andy occupied with many performances throughout the year.



*Andy Kostynuik, Cast member of I Love The  
Downtown Eastside  
Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Through artistic expression, Andy defies cookie-cutter social norms and political correctness. He is unafraid to express his views on religion, the feminist movement, or drug restrictions. "I'm a drug user," Andy confesses.

Any restriction on artistic expression troubles Andy, from laws against marijuana to the narrow-mindedness of university professors. “It’s a real moral disconnect,” Andy says, discussing the division between artists and contemporary society. “It’s just not fair to artists. Artists have been—we’ve been—kicked around for thousands of years, and I think it’s got to stop.” Though often faced with misunderstanding and disapproval, Andy remains strong in his stance for freedom in the arts. “I’m going to keep on fighting,” he says.

The regenerative potential of the arts keeps Andy passionate about his music and *The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*, since “artists are really necessary to heal society.” Andy’s strong dedication to his music remains immovable, as he strives to create a better, more compassionate world through art.

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At first glance, Robyn Livingstone resembles the lovechild of Neil Young and Frankie Venom, coupled with the swagger of Johnny Cash and divided by a sphinx like quality. Few are immune to his intrigue and charm. At second glance, not much is different, other than that by this point, he has begun speaking and while the riddle begins to unravel, the alchemistic singularity that is Rockin’ Robin remains intact.

Robyn earned the nickname Rockin’ not surprisingly in reference to the song (Rockin’ Robin) but also for his affinity for music. “Yeah I got it, I don’t know when, yeah. Awhile ago. It just kind of stuck. Yeah, I’ve been Rockin’ Robin for awhile, all over too.” By virtue of his aforementioned demeanour and presence, Robyn’s past is something that inspires curiosity.

“I’ve been around here, you know. For the most part anyway. I went to Europe, the US, but I came back, because it’s a great city. It’s one of the best places on Earth. I like all the communities. It’s not too modern but it also is. I like it all.”



*Robyn Livingstone, Cast member of Condemned*  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

Travelling to the United States to perform music when he was younger, Robyn’s life, defined somewhat aptly as nomadic, has allowed him to develop certain preferences. “I love Vancouver you know, but the rain, sometimes, you gotta get away from it. I like Spain, Majorca, North Africa. I like that kind of extreme heat. I came back though yeah. I might go back and live there. It’s a big world. The roads are many and the roads are long. Things around keep me here but it is always in the back of my mind to go, go somewhere else.”

Artistic opportunity is one of the main reasons that Robyn struggles with the idea of leaving. “If you want to be an actor here, there aren’t too many opportunities to make a living at it. The rate of pay is quite low. So yeah, I think about going. A lot of the time here you do films for free.” The local productions Robyn has been involved in, however, have afforded him the



opportunity to hone his craft. “You have several different characters and they all have different voices and so you have to constantly change faces.”

Much like the rest of the cast, Robyn’s contribution to the Downtown Eastside community has been diverse. “I volunteer you know, like I have been involved in Carnegie for a while. I’m a poet. I’m involved in the writer’s festival. That’s how I heard about this, by being involved in the community. The zeal to be involved is immediately contrasted with an admission of hesitation, “I wanted to be, but I wasn’t sure if I did. I kind of hesitated. Why? I don’t know. I knew some of the people and yeah. I gradually become involved.”

The aloof attitude Robyn possesses is slightly undermined by the very faint grin which accompanies each of his statements. From a very young age he needed to perform: “I heard Sinatra on my parent’s radio. I heard Frank and I knew I that was what I was going to do. I was five. I heard Sinatra you know. Even when I see the people doin’ Elvis or Johnny Cash, at Carnegie or whenever I perform I still like it. The people down here like it too.”

The people in the DTES and surrounding areas and the social problems which plague the community are something that Robyn speaks about quite comfortably. “Everyone down here you know, housing coalitions, activists, anti-poverty committee, VANDU, they are all down here, involved. They are fighters you know, all of us are. They get people out and they make noise. That is what it’s all about. That is what these plays are about. It’s all for the cause. We are working to hang on.”

There is a sense of desperation that is prevalent in the community at times that is

strangely in contrast with an overwhelming sense of hope. For Robyn this indicates a challenge as it highlights the interdependence between the two and how he and his peers express themselves. “We are just trying to hang on. I sort of follow the global situation. You see where it’s headed. Everyone is in the same boat, the middle class is being phased out and now they are getting scared. We are all in this together.”

Reluctant to talk too much about his personal life, Robyn notes the struggle to affect change is not unique to him or to the DTES and that he and his friends in the community will fight so long as injustice exists. “You have to you known. I am a fighter. We all are. But this is global and we are a small part of it. We are doing our part.”

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Lu Davika’s raw musical talent and rich voice might surprise people, given her modest training, described simply as “a little bit here and there.” Lu has been singing for as long as she remembers. “I started when I was younger. My mother sings. She sings beautifully. Growing up my brother and sister used to sing songs. We learnt them all the time. We started writing a little of our own stuff and performing it.”

Lu’s strong vocal presence and warm, gentle demeanour play a central role in the *Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*. Performing a selection from *Condemned* (2006), Lu’s familiarity and comfort within the DTES arts community reflects her understanding of the importance of the community’s artistic output. “I emailed Terry and Savannah to be a part of the production. I had initially auditioned for performances in the past and wanted to be involved in this one too. I like being a part



of it, it's good to see people again. I think it's important for me to be involved. I want to be involved in it."



*Lu Davika, Cast member of **Condemned***  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

When discussing the social implications of the *Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*, Lu is cautiously optimistic about the production's impact on the community. The content of each piece accurately reflects concerns within the DTES, and focuses needed attention on serious issues within the DTES and on its social peripheral. "Low income people have nowhere else to go [because of] the gentrification that is going on here and the evictions. It's important to talk about that and reveal that. This community it does work though." Although Lu recognizes the flaws within her community—prostitution, drugs, but not poverty (Lu doesn't consider poverty a flaw)—Lu remains dedicated to creating positive change in the DTES. "You get to be more creative at finding solutions. I find that people are really generous down here. They don't have a lot but they share what they got."

Like many of the cast members, Lu identifies as an activist for the DTES. Through participating in marches and demonstrations as well performing in productions like the

showcase, Lu has discovered a close and often overlapping relationship between the art world and politics. "Here, in this community, there is so much art and creativity – often from the same people who also are involved in social justice."

Lu is concerned that the "amazing and vast" artistic output generated by the DTES community is largely ignored by the media. "The drug users and the street workers are here and they get talked about a lot. But that is just one little part. People have been down here for decades already, you know, living. It's a very established community and it always has been." Lu feels responsibility both as an artist and activist to express and help define the entire fabric of the community. "The productions are another way to tell the story of what goes on down here. To get a sense of what the community is like. The Heart of the City Festival grows every year." Even though Lu does not have time to perform, she has still found a way to be involved in the DTES theatre productions in one way or another. "I want to be involved because it affects me, it affects us."

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The ability to make decisions is often dependant on the ability to embrace change. For Bharbara Gudmundson, the decision to become involved in the performing arts was motivated largely by her ability to affect change. With over 25 years of being active in the performance community, Bharbara has balanced her personal life with what she describes as an imperative to be artistically expressive, viewed entirely through the lens of social justice. "It's all about social justice. There is a unique feeling with artistic impression, which allows you to promote your ideals."

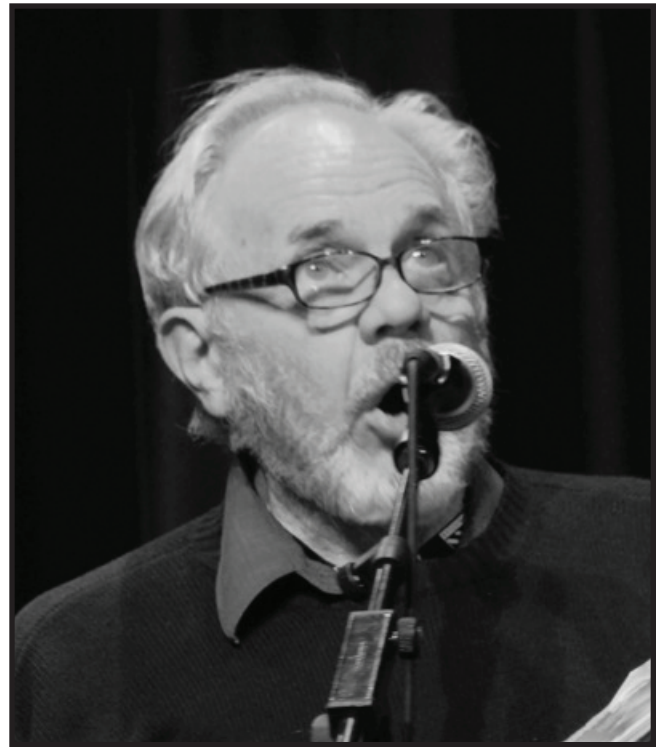
also need to be involved. I need to be here.”

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Whether it is his loud movements and clothing, his distinct laughter, his helpful suggestions or quirky humour, Jason Logan is hard to miss. He rests his elbow on the plain windowsill now, the heavy fur lining of his hat circling his forehead. It's now his turn for an interview, and like a performer taking to stage, Jason begins talking, demanding and engaging every last ounce of his interviewer's concentration.

"I'm not showing off," Jason says sincerely, as he finishes his latest impromptu lesson on North American political history, "but I want you to get these names down." He leans imperceptibly heavier on the windowsill, and tells a hundred stories of political theatre in days long past.

Jason has a family history with theatre -- his great uncle Jack managed the Capital Vaudeville Theatre (London, Ontario), and his grandfather Mika Harakis built half a dozen silent movie palaces (Chatham and Sarnia). Jason's own involvement with political theatre began in the early 1960s, when he joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe, a politically-active student-governed collective. In the Mime Troupe, Jason worked tirelessly for the budding anti-war and pro-feminist movements, starring in and popularising political plays like Rochelle Owen's *Futz*, Bertolt Brecht's *Die Mutter*, and winning a 1973 Off-Broadway (Obie) Award for his work in Joan Holden's *Dragon Lady's Revenge*—a powerful musical satire of the CIA heroin trade in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. He also worked with Jane Fonda during the Indo-



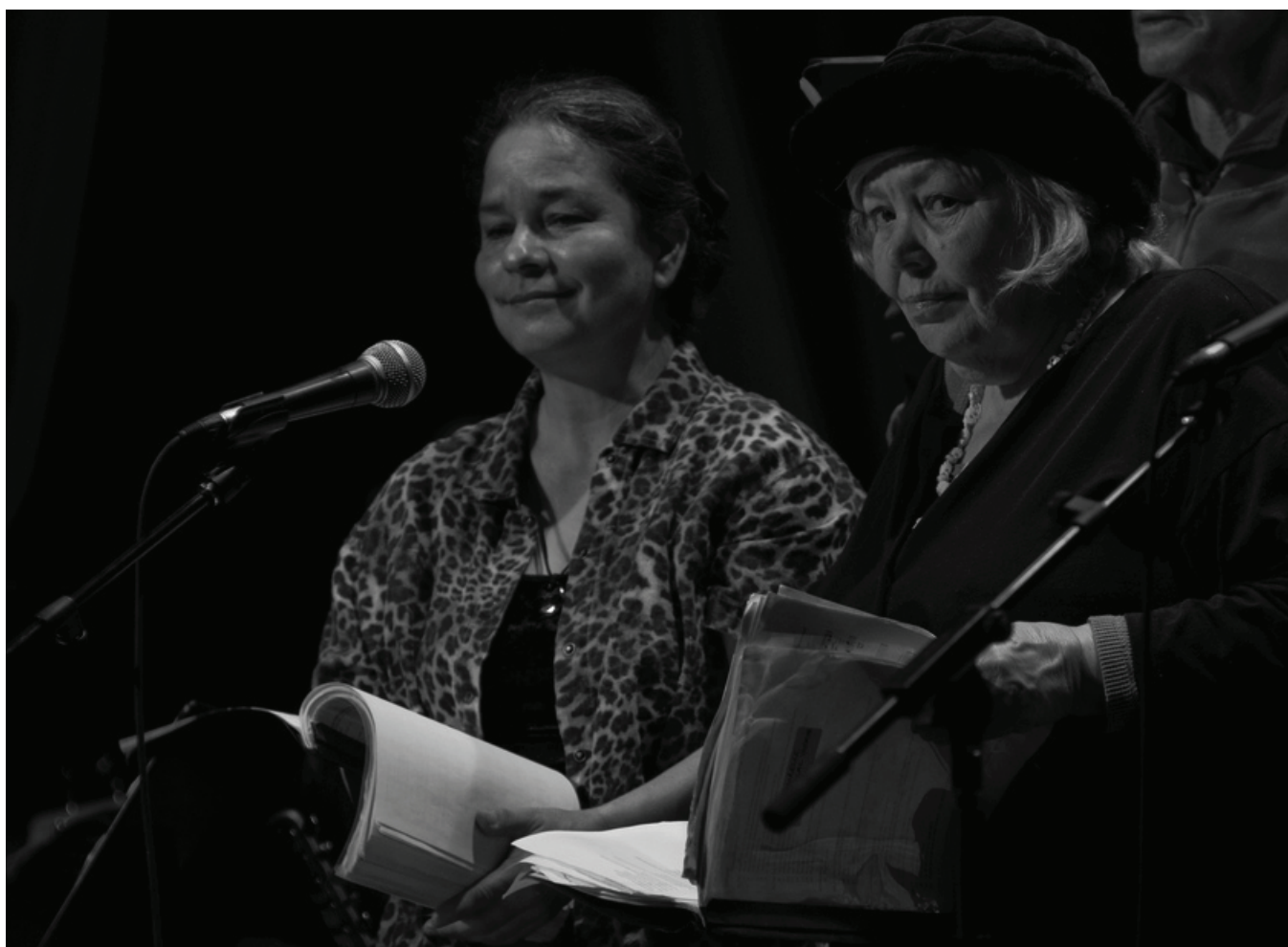
*Jason Logan, Cast Member and/or crew of  
I Love the Downtown Eastside, We're All  
In This Together, and Condemned*

*Photograph by Ken Tabata*

China war, and received a kiss from her on their shared birthday.

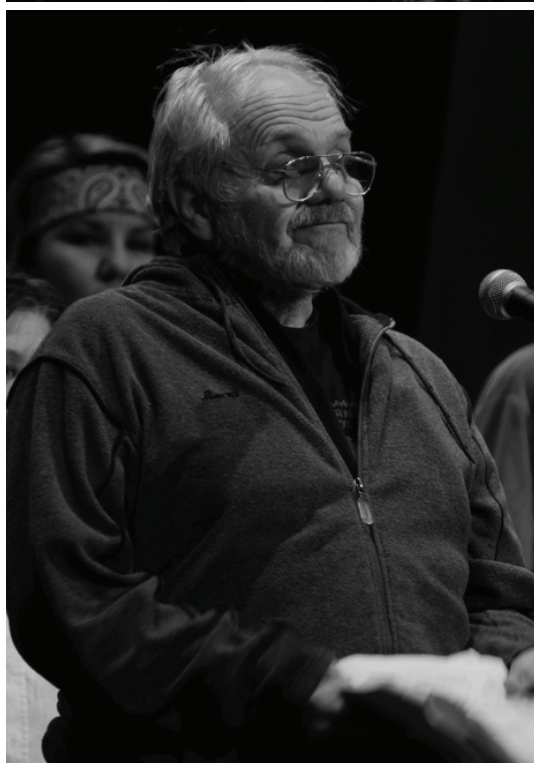
"I'm something of a radical," Jason says modestly.

Though Jason's career in theatre and television has brought him to 3 provinces in Canada, 25 states in the US, the District of Colombia, and 2 states in Mexico, he came from humble beginnings. He was raised in Ontario by his grandmother and mother, a war widow from WWII. Having never known his father, Jason honoured the sacrifices his mother made for him by adopting her maiden name, Logan. Through the hardships his mother had to face as a sole breadwinner for their family, Jason developed a strong hatred for all wars, which naturally progressed into a lifetime of anti-war activism and political involvement. Now at 68, Jason emphasizes the necessity of the anti-



***Top:** Lu Davika and Joan Morelli go over their scores together during rehearsal.*

***Left:** Jason Logan grins at the audience.*





Bharbara joins the conversation with remarkable authority, a theatrical cadence at odds with a calm delivery - all of which does a poor job at masking her profound commitment to affecting positive change in her community. “I get really frustrated with the kinds of things that are done to human beings” Bharbara firmly states, suggesting the confluence of her artistic expression and activism serve collectively as a response to the problems which she describes as global injustice.



***Bharbara Gudmundson, Cast member of *Condemned****  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

In the mid 1980's, Bharbara began volunteering at the Carnegie Community Centre. In her own time as well as in various community productions, Bharbara sang and performed pieces that approximated the experience of those – many close to her– affected by various systems of oppression. Bharbara calls her jam session in the Carnegie Centre “practice slots,” and approaches the act of performance as practicing communicating one's message.

“It's been hard at times. Very difficult. But the more I do, the more I become comfortable with it.” The learning approach taken by Bharbara, and indeed as she notes many in the community,

has allowed her to develop an understanding of not only the affect of music but also her own personal limits. “I was bringing up my kids, volunteering at Carnegie, you know. Plus I am a disabled person, so a lot of it was hard work. I did everything I did to hang on” she quietly reflects which, if only for a moment, reveals her vulnerability. With hair muted silver in colour matching the worn chrome of her mobility aid, Bharbara maintains the mien of a survivor.

Quite eager to discuss her role as an activist, Bharbara describes her foray into environmental activism in 1991 when she launched a campaign against the city regarding waste disposal. “The garbage trucks were dragging bags of trash, leaving behind a waste residue that was making people sick. How are people supposed to be healthy if this is happening? I wrote a letter to the city and just went from there.” The arc of Bharbara's involvement is nothing short of impressive, resulting in her launching a petition (#277) and photographically and digitally documenting the practices of the municipal waste service. For Bharbara, her direct action goes part and parcel with her artistic expression noting that both are about a commitment to something you believe in. “In *Condemned* (2006), I was cast as the ranting political activist. I am the ranting political activist in real life. My friends were not shocked by this. They certainly agreed with the ranting part. Similar with how I got involved in this production. In many ways it's me.”

The content of the production and the nature of her activism suggest for Bharbara that her world, specifically the DTES (her home for the last quarter century), is a microcosm of widespread social injustice, requiring people, fighters and allies to counteract the effects of disparity. “I feel like I should participate. But I



war movement, studying the origins, cause, and reasons behind war, in hopes to someday stop all wars.

When discussing the value of political theatre, Jason recalls his time in the Mime Troupe, where they “were organizing a community—organizing poor people, working class people, [and] students.” Now back in Vancouver, Jason is taking part in another community through theatre. He has been an active member in the DTES theatre productions’ creative process, co-wrote lyrics to *Condemned* and worked technical crew on *We’re All In This Together*.

Through his many years of involvement with political theatre, Jason has seen first-hand how theatre companies struggle financially during productions: “A lot [of political theatre] that I’ve seen, unfortunately, is so dependent on government handouts and corporate funding... and this economy has hit them both really hard. So if things seem kind of threadbare this year, that’s the reason.” He points to funding issues which restricted audiovisual and artistic aspects of *Bruce the Musical*.

But as always, Jason is not out of solutions. Jason often shares his expertise (wanted and unwanted) on stage, suggesting and directing stage set-up, musical improvisation, and performance blocking. With limited funds, Jason jokes, “you’ve got to be more creative... and of course have lots of volunteers.”

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Joan Morelli is one-of-a-kind, a rare individual brimming with loving and playful charm. She stumbles into the cafe for her interview slightly out of breath, a large canvas bag of belongings over one shoulder, her

signature black toque snug over her short blond hair. The subtle rasp of her rich voice hints at the pain she has overcome in her life. As a survivor of two different kinds of cancer, resilience and optimism play a large role in Joan’s life.

Joan has been a resident of the DTES for 15



**Joan Morelli, cast member of The Downtown Eastside Community Play and We’re All In This Together**

*Photograph by Loni Taylor*

years, and has paid close attention to the trials and suffering of others living in her community. She feels that the mistreatment of homeless residents of the DTES by the government may be in part due to biased media attention. To Joan, if the media does coverage of the DTES community, “they should do it honestly”. She abhors how media sensationalizes the “tough” parts of the DTES, but glosses over or outright ignores improving and growing parts of the community.

Raising awareness of the plight and successes of the DTES is Joan’s priority. Recently Joan has focused her attention on the Vancouver upper-class, whose involvement would make a powerful impact on the DTES both financially and emotionally. Despite differences in income or socioeconomic status, Joan advocates for a

union of residents of our city, be it from West Vancouver or the DTES. This union would benefit everyone, bridging the gap between the rich and poor, and creating a larger sense of community within our city.

Joan advocates for artistic expression to showcase the heart and spirit of her community: "all the world is truly a stage and we in the DTES aren't a war zone. We may often be broken-hearted, but we are truly capable. There's a lot of creativity. [I want to] pick up the skills and magic touch to do all that instead of just dreaming about it." (Quoted by Savannah, transcribed at a Breaking into the Biz workshop, 2004). Joan remains dedicated to arts, in hopes that the power of song and theatre from the DTES will transcend financial and social barriers and remain timeless for generations to come.

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As the curtain rises for the final performance of *The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*, the packed audience inside the Russian Theatre becomes enveloped in an energy and sense of anticipation which can only ever be found in live theatrical productions. Gone are the backpacks and jackets which filled the hall during rehearsals as well as the bannock, fresh jam and tea which were so widely enjoyed during breaks. These comforts are instead replaced by an enthusiastic crowd which hangs onto the cast's every note. The stage direction and coffee breaks between sets are replaced by the laughter, cat calls and raucous applause of an enthusiastic audience and the excitement in the room is infectious; the crowd becomes energized by the performances on stage, and the performers in turn are lifted by the response of the crowd. With each song a story is told,

exploring the nuances of the community; ideas of love, poverty, social justice, addiction and friendship are explored with humour, seriousness and compassion until the final song ends with roaring guitar and piano solos lifting the crowd to its feet. Coffee, it seems, will not be needed for anyone this evening.

After the performance ends and the cast members have taken their bows, they meet collectively in a back room for a private moment



***The cast of The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase thanks the band and acknowledges the crowd.***

*Photograph by Ken Tabata*

together before going out to meet their guests. Hugs and congratulations are exchanged while in a kitchen downstairs, someone has managed to order a few boxes of pizza in celebration of a job well done. Finally, as people slowly file out of the hall, a catchy tune on their tongues, the members of *The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase* are finally able to sit back and reflect on what they've accomplished. "We'll do this again, sweetie" says Sue Blue as she finishes her last bite of crust. We certainly hope so.

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*Written and edited by Mark Hombrebueno, KaGeen Cheung and Miranda Lee with written contributions by Gord McCullough. Photography by Loni Taylor, Ken Tabata, Bharbara Gudmundson, and Katherine Fleitas.*

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## Vancouver Moving Theatre

*“We are proud of our community’s plays, proud of its stories and songs, and proud of all the hundreds of artists and community members who’ve brought them to life.”- Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling, Vancouver Moving Theatre*



*Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling in The Runners’ Tale. Photograph by David Cooper.*

Savannah Walling is the artistic Director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, a professional interdisciplinary company she co-founded 26 years ago with executive producer and husband Terry Hunter. Poised on the Pacific Rim, the small company creates repertoire in collaboration with artists from many genres, techniques and traditions; produces an annual multi-disciplinary festival and develops educational resources. After touring internationally for 25 years with mask dance-dramas and drum dances, then producing original plays and adaptations of classic text featuring live music, they currently focus on community-engaged cultural projects with and for their Downtown Eastside inner city home (including the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival).

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### Acknowledgements

*Special thanks to Savannah Walling and VMT for guiding our writing process, and to all the wonderful people working on the Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Production for their kindness, generosity and support. An extra special thanks to the interview participants: Savannah Walling, Sue Blue, Stephen Lytton, Tom Quirk, Jim Sands, Gena Thompson, Andy Kostyniuk, Lu Davika, Bharbara Gudmundson, Jason Logan, Joan Morelli, Neil Weisensel, and Robyn Livingstone; Thank you for sharing your thoughts and memories with us and allowing this project to come to life.*

*Davika, Lu. Personal interview. 20 Oct 2009.  
Gudmundson, Bharbara. Personal interview. 19 Oct 2009.  
Kostyniuk, Andy. Personal interview. 20 Oct 2009.  
Logan, Jason. Personal interview. 25 Oct 2009.  
Lytton, Stephen. Personal interview. 25 Oct 2009.  
--. Email interview. 25 Nov 2009.  
Morelli, Joan. Personal interview. 25 Oct 2009.*

*Quirk, Tom. Personal interview. 28 Oct 2009.  
--. Email interview. 25 Nov 2009.  
Sands, Jim. Personal interview. 25 Oct 2009.  
Thompson, Gena. Personal interview. 25 Oct 2009.  
Walling, Savannah. Personal interview. 20 Oct 2009.  
Weisensel, Neil. Personal interview. 27 Oct 2009.*

## The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase (2009)

*"The Downtown Eastside's Greatest Hits!" –Robyn Livingstone*

*"It's great to let more people know there's more about the DTES than what they read in the papers... there's a thriving arts community here and there's a lot of great people. The arts are changing people's lives here." -- Neil Weisensel, Musical Director*

Produced by VMT in partnership with the 6th Annual Heart of the City festival, this musical extravaganza showcases 31 original songs from 7 DTES musical theatre productions created in the last 7 years. Performed twice in the Russian Hall to enthusiastic audiences, the showcase captures the challenges, trials, and triumphs of the DTES community. Selected songs include "You Are Not Alone," a touching ballad from *I Love the Downtown Eastside*, and a collection of gritty laments from *Condemned*. Directed by \*Neil Weisensel

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\*Neil Weisensel is a professional composer, conductor and multi-instrumentalist who became involved in DTES community productions in 2001 when he was asked by Savage God Theatre Director John Juliani to be the musical director for *I Love the Downtown Eastside*. After years



**Neil Weisensel, Musical Director of The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase.**  
*Photograph by Loni Taylor.*

of scheduling conflicts, Neil was finally able to return to DTES community productions and collaborate with VMT as the musical director for *The Downtown Eastside Music Theatre Showcase*. In developing the production's format, Neil worked with Savannah Walling, Terry Hunter and several other composers from previous community

productions to structure 30 songs from the seven different plays, into one congruent performance. This proved to be a challenging task as the songs represented many different musical genres ranging from rock, to opera, reggae, new music, blues, and more. Despite the challenges, Neil finds his work in the DTES community to be incredibly rewarding, both on a personal level and to the community at large and chastises the government's recent decision to cut funding from arts programs:

*"VMT is transforming lives through the arts. They're being punished because (their work) is artistic and (community arts projects) are typically the first thing that gets thrown on the waste line by a government that just doesn't understand how important they are to people."*

Despite the government's apparent indifference, Neil believes the impact of these productions is not difficult to perceive: "The point is to provide citizens with a rich cultural experience, no matter what their income is". According to Neil, there is a charge produced by each performance that affects both the participants and the audience alike. Where does it come from? How does it work? Art possesses a mysterious power, he says, "we don't know how it works, we just know that it does".



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## I Love the Downtown Eastside: A Valentine to the City from the Downtown Eastside (2002)

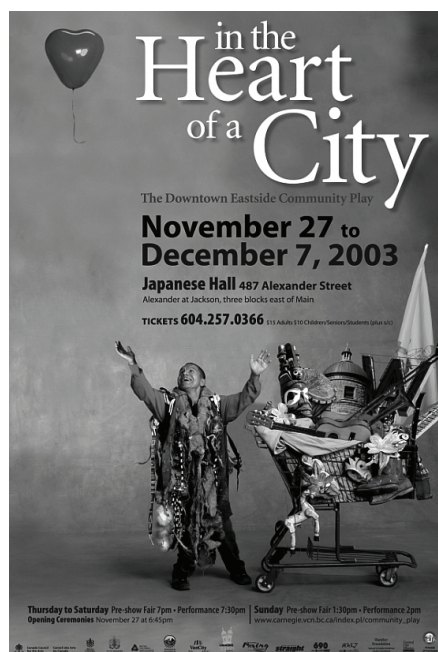
*"I Love the Downtown Eastside is dedicated to the residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, whose passion, endurance, hunger for knowledge and determination for self-improvement in the face of staggering obstacles is an example for any community to follow and a cause for celebration." – John Juliani*

A pilot capacity-building project called D.E.M.O.C.R.A.C.E, this production produced by Savage God Theatre Company celebrated the beauty and breadth of the DTES community and challenged many of the unwarranted prejudices directed at DTES residents. A landmark in DTES community-engaged theatre, this collection of songs, poems, stand-up comedy routines and cast testimonials was performed by over 20 DTES-involved residents of varying ages and postal codes and premiered at the St. James Anglican Church Hall to a sold-out house. *Directed by John Juliani with musical direction by Neil Weisensel.*

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## In the Heart of a City: The Downtown Eastside Community Play (2003)

*"A vibrant Downtown Eastside theatre community has been created. People are getting to know each other. People connected to the play are greeting each other on the street. They know their play reflects the strength, pain, and beauty of our multicultural Downtown Eastside that rises like the phoenix, from one generation to another." –Sandy Cameron, Carnegie Newsletter*



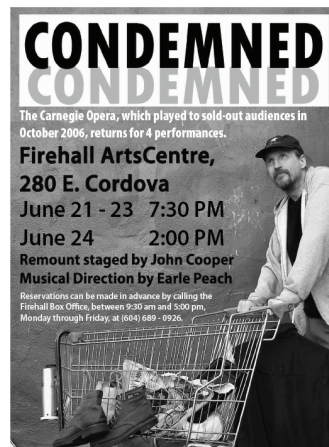
An explorative journey through 150 years of history in the DTES, The Downtown Eastside Community Play was co-produced by Vancouver Moving Theatre and the Carnegie Community Center. This production wove together a tapestry of the sadness, tears, happiness and laughter grounded in the rich history of the Vancouver Eastside. Performed by over 80 different volunteers young and old (including a cameo by then-Mayor Larry Campbell), the production premiered nine times to sold-out audiences in Vancouver's Japanese Hall. *Directed by James Fagin Tait. Original Music by Wyckham Porteus, Joelysa Pankanea.*

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## Condemned: The Opera (2006)

*“The Carnegie Community Centre shines in opera about social housing... The audience’s make-up is a sign of the times. It’s a cross-over of society, from Vancouverites who live in rooming houses to those who live in the best parts of town, all unified by their recognition that housing for the needy has become one of Vancouver’s, and British Columbia’s, most pressing challenges. – Miro Cernetig, Vancouver Sun*

Written primarily by DTES-involved community members, this production by the Carnegie Opera Project chronicled the story of DTES residents who had been left homeless after being forced out of a low-income hotel facing re-development. After a highly acclaimed first run by an ensemble cast of 15 singers and 7 musicians, the production was remounted by popular demand at the Firehall Arts Centre. *Directed by Susanna Uchatius*  
*Music by Earle Peach.*



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## We're All In This Together: The Shadows Project – Addiction and Recovery (2007)

*“In front of the shadow screen, audiences learned about addiction and recovery from the viewpoint of people from the Downtown Eastside... Normal social markers seemed to dissolve in the discussion circles of performers and audience members that were organized after each performance. It was as if the people had forgotten the conventional distinction of addiction versus non-addicted. Rather, they spoke as citizens of a distressed city with shared concerns and ideas to work over together.” Bruce Alexander – The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit (pp 374-375).*



In 2005 Vancouver Moving Theatre began a groundbreaking project in collaboration with professional artists and DTES-involved residents to explore the roots of substance abuse and addiction in the DTES. We're All In This Together is the shadow play that emerged from the recollections of over 1000 people. After compiling stories and images from interviews, forums and questionnaires and holding several arts workshops aimed at developing artistic performance skills within the community, the elaborate production finally debuted in 2007, produced by VMT in association with urban ink's Fathom Labs and the Carnegie and Roundhouse Community Centres. Utilizing the incredibly

intricate medium of giant-screen shadow puppetry, *We're All in this Together* revolved around the struggles of two different families to overcome the consequences of addiction and substance abuse. Performed by over thirty cast members in a collaboration developed with the help of over two dozen writers, artists, and crew members, the eight performances at the Russian Hall culminated a socially meaningful cinematic and artistic success, ending in packed houses and fascinated audiences. *Directed by Kim Collier. Music by Joelysa Pankanea and Yawen V. Wang.*

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### **The Returning Journey (2007)**

*"I have had a heart attack, a stroke, recovered from addiction, homelessness and childhood abuse and feel blessed to be alive and to have the opportunity to share and to give of myself"*  
—Dalannah Gail Bowen

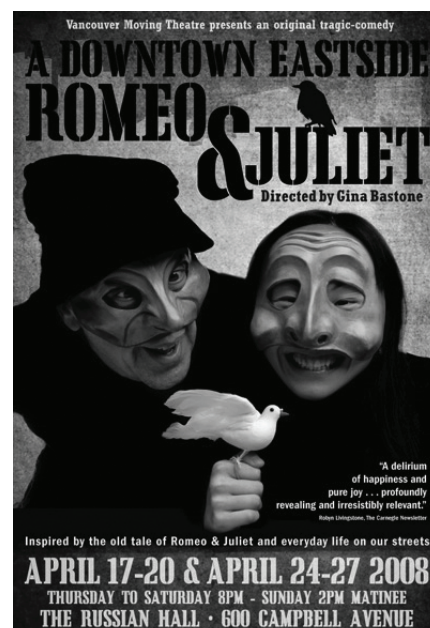
Written and performed by Dalannah Gail Bowen, creative director of the Downtown Eastside Centre For The Arts, this production premiered to wide acclaim at the Firehall Arts Centre in the DTES. Chronicling Dalannah's personal journey of overcoming health problems and addiction, this fusion of blues and jazz retells Dalannah's inspiring story of overcoming the odds and fighting back against the stigmas of the DTES. Her CD release with songs from the show – *Mama's Got The Blues* – is receiving air play around the world. *Directed by Dalannah Gail Bowen. Music by Dalannah Gail Bowen and Michael Creber.*

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### **A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet (2008)**

*"A Downtown Eastside Romeo and Juliet is a delirium of happiness and pure joy... and thought provoking madness... profoundly revealing and irresistibly relevant."* —Robyn Livingstone, Carnegie Newsletter

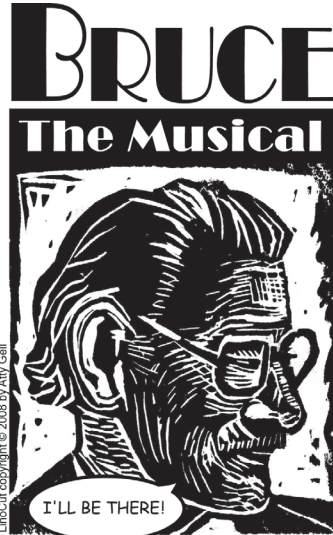
Produced by Vancouver Moving Theatre, this production, inspired by the old take of *Romeo and Juliet* and everyday life on Downtown Eastside streets, explored the depths of love and humour in the DTES community. The production was composed of a 14-member cast of DTES residents and professional performers, and premiered eight times at Vancouver's Russian Theatre Hall, culminating in sold-out audiences. Written by Gina Bastone (director) and the ensemble team, with contributions from Mike Stack and W. Shakespeare. *Original songs by Mike Richter and Jim Sands, musical direction by Dorothy Dittrich.*



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## Bruce – The Musical (2008)

*“We in the Downtown Eastside are proud of the story this play tells. It expands our memory. It strengthens our sense of who we are... Thank you to all the people who contributed to the play over the year, and to those who saw it and loved it, and came away refreshed and ready for the ongoing struggle, remembering that Bruce Eriksen never, ever, gave up”. -Sandy Cameron, the Carnegie Newsletter*



Produced by Theatre in the Raw for the 5th Annual Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival, this production celebrates the life of activist Bruce Eriksen. Written by former Vancouver Sun reporter Bob Sarti, the production chronicled the profound achievements of Bruce Eriksen, which included saving the Carnegie Community Centre, building fire protection in hotels and earning recognition of the Downtown Eastside as a residential community. The production was performed by a 14-member cast to a full house in the Russian Hall. Directed by Jay Hamburger. Music by Earle Peach and Bill Sample.

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### Final Thoughts from the Writing Team:

*Working with the cast and crew of the DTES Music Theatre Showcase to produce this illustrated essay has been, by far, one of the most rewarding and challenging endeavours of my life. I met some incredible people in the DTES community, forged good friendships with the members of our writing team (after sharing dozens of emails, meetings and cups of coffee) and found inspiration in the passion, exuberance and humility with which the production's cast and crew shared their thoughts, stories and artistic talents. My initial interviews with Savannah Walling and Sue Blue (from which my portion of the essay were based on) were equally inspiring and gently opened my eyes to the talent, dignity and heart which permeates Vancouver's DTES community. This being said, I also got to see a fantastic concert (twice!) which would have been good in and of itself, but was made all the more enjoyable because I had gotten to know so many of the participants and had become invested in their success. I don't think I've ever sat in an audience and clapped harder or been happier for the performers. The essay itself has probably consisted of more work than I've ever done for a single class project, (although I will never complain, considering how effectively Miranda kept our team informed- having sent and received a few hundred phone calls, emails and text msgs and how incredibly positive Ka Geen has remained throughout the process) but I think that being asked to document and critically access my impressions has allowed me to really take in my experiences over these last few months and allowed those experiences to create a more lasting, positive impression in me. All things considered, I'm really glad that I was allowed to share in the experience of this production; the road was rough at times, but the journey itself was well worth the effort. -Mark Hombrebueno*



*I was the ignorant west-ender you've read about. Totally oblivious of the DTES arts community and a firm believer of the stigma surrounding the DTES, I plunged into this project with only one thought in mind: to overcome my irrational fear of the Vancouver Eastside. From the first moment I tiptoed into the Russian Theatre Hall to be greeted by Savannah's endless acceptance, understanding, and patience, to my last exuberant catcall at the finale performance, this project has shifted the foundations of my life. Through meeting the wacky and passionate people in the DTES community, all my preconceptions have been stripped away, opening my eyes to the unknown strength, talent, and inspiration within the heart of the Vancouver DTES. My interviews with Gena, Andy, and Jason exposed me to the honesty and passion within the DTES arts community. With each laugh shared, I became more personally invested in their success. I wanted them all to do well—and more than that, I was determined that everyone see and really know how they did well. I formed strong friendships with Miranda Lee and Mark Hombrebueno as we tackled this journey together, sharing hundreds of insights, coffees, and sleepless nights in the library (one day we'll all show up on time). It was a continually evolving process, as we struggled to convey, even for the briefest of moments, the beauty of the stories we were told. As the feverish pitch of writing calms down, I am left with fleeting moments I'll cherish forever: Gena's sass on stage, Andy's rare laughter, and Jason's shifty jokes. This piece is dedicated to all the people in Vancouver; regardless of postal code: to those who gave their time to share their memories with us, and to those whose stories still lie close to their hearts. —Ka Geen Cheung*

*Heaps of emails, phone calls, meetings, and cups of coffee later, we end here with an illustrated essay on the DTES Music Theatre Showcase of 2009. At the onset of this assignment, I was both nervous and excited to work with the cast and crew members of the production. I can say now that the nerves are gone but the excitement is evermore present. On the night of our meet and greet, I had two goals in mind for our group: to share the stories of the cast and crew and to create a document that would remind the community what honest, colourful, and brilliant art they are capable of creating because of and despite their struggles. Walking away from that meet and greet, I looked at my writing team, Mark Hombrebueno and Ka Geen Cheung, with whom I would forge amazingly dynamic friendships, and saw the same look of excitement. After each rehearsal, I walked away enriched by conversations about hardships, miracles, art, the creative process, and community. My outlook on the DTES has shifted. As a young girl, I saw Chinatown (particularly Main and Hastings) as the face of the DTES. But after being involved with the documentation of the Showcase, I have been introduced to a whole new community of the arts where "Connect. Create. Collaborate" forms a mantra. Savannah, Jim, Joan, Stephen, and Tom: thank you for sharing your stories and art with myself and the rest of the community. I will take away from this experience your smiles, tears, and the amazing performances you gave on both nights. It is truly a treasure trove of beautiful music, beautiful spirits, and resilience. Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget the things you say. People will forget the things you did. But people will never forget the way you made them feel." I will never forget the way the songs and people made me feel. - Miranda Lee.*