



Floyd Favel  
Jess Glavina  
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Stephanie Lambert  
Jeannine Pitas  
Nikki Shaffeeullah  
Alex Tigchelaar  
Anna Roth Trowbridge  
Savannah Walling



theatre

cultural diversity and the stage

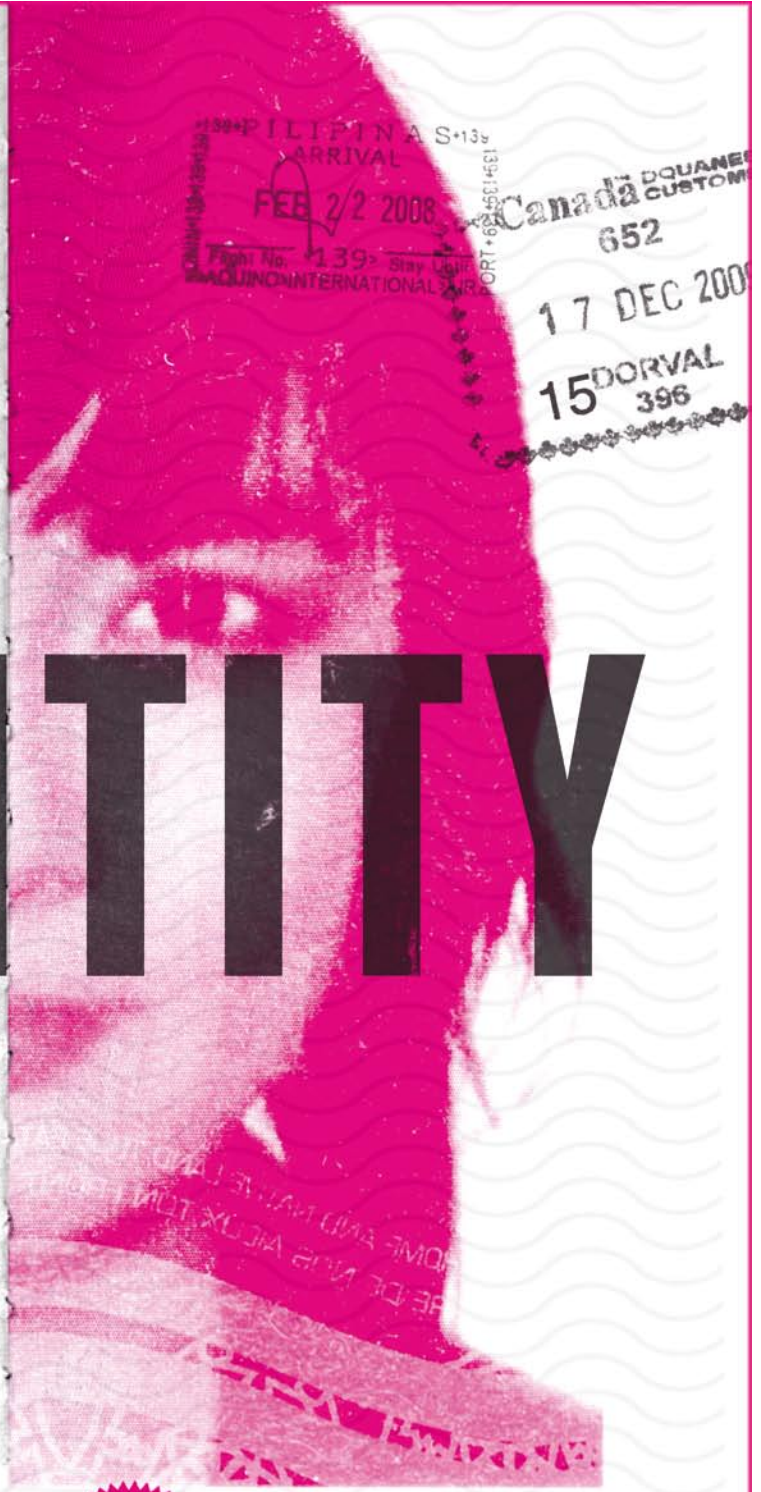
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### DISPATCH RAHUL VARMA

on multi-ethnic casting with reference to recent plays produced by Teesri Duniya Theatre.

### BOOK REVIEW ALBERTO GUEVARA

reviewing *Popular Political Theatre and Performance and Community Engaged Theatre and Performance* (ed. Julie Salverson): volumes 17 & 19 of the *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* series.

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Image from Vancouver Moving Theatre's  
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## ARTICLES



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is an actor, director, improviser, and community-based theatre facilitator who has worked on many theatre-for-development projects across Canada and internationally. She is currently an MFA candidate in the University of Alberta's Department of Drama, where she is completing her thesis, *Staging Diversity: A Practical Investigation of Community-Based Theatre and the Settlement Process*. Nikki holds a BA in International Development Studies and Theatre from McGill University.



### **FLOYD FAVEL**

is a Cree Indian from the Poundmaker Reserve. He studied theatre in Denmark and Italy. His theatre work has been presented nationally and internationally, as has his dramatic, theoretical, and journalistic writing. Currently he is compiling a book of essays by himself and other contributors on Native Performance Culture, which is a culmination of his lifelong research in developing a theatre process based on Indigenous cultures. He is also producing a feature film with Kunuk Cohn Productions from Montreal.



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is a Downtown Eastside resident and artistic director of Vancouver Moving Theatre (with whom she's created over fifty productions); associate artistic director of the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival; and singer with the Barvinok Ukrainian choir. Savannah researches, writes/co-writes, and oversees multi-layered original productions that interweave localized content, accessible storytelling, spectacle, and live music (most recently *Storyweaving: Weaving First Nations Memories from the Past into the Future*).



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Alexandra Tigchelaar (Sasha Van Bon Bon) is co-founder of Operation Snatch (formerly The Scandelles) and has been writing, creating and performing with the company since 2000. She writes all the company's productions and enjoys the progression of creation from intimate to collaborative. Notable productions are *Under the Mink*, *Les Demimondes*, *Who's Your Dada?*, *Neon Nightz* and *The Death Show*. Tigchelaar also wrote the script for a short porn film in collaboration with Bruce LaBruce called *Give Piece of Ass a Chance*, which starred The Scandelles and screened at over twenty international film festivals.



### **STEPHANIE LAMBERT**

is a theatre and film designer and a visual artist. She has worked with professional and community companies in both Montreal and Whitehorse. She spent the first part of 2012 as a volunteer theatre design teacher for the EsArtes Project in Suchitoto, El Salvador. Since last spring, Stephanie has been working with the Flat Bay Mi'kmaq Band in Newfoundland on the visual design aspects of the documentary film, *The Native's Story*.



### **JEANNINE M. PITAS**

is a PhD candidate at University of Toronto's Centre for Comparative Literature, where she researches twentieth-century Latin American poetry. However, Polish literature is a strong secondary interest. She is the English translator of Uruguayan writer Marosa di Giorgio's *The History of Violets*, which was published by Ugly Duckling Presse in 2010. Her own first poetry chapbook, *Our Lady of the Snow Angels*, will be published by Toronto-based LyricalMyrical Press in late 2012.

## DISPATCHES



### JESS GLAVINA

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is from Montreal. Since graduating from McGill with a degree in English Theatre and Cognitive Science, she's researched the brain (the hippocampus, specifically), travelled and taught English, planted trees in Western Canada, and performed other odd jobs. She is currently in Texas getting better acquainted with the art of small farming and working in the heat. She hopes to continue experiencing a range of performance art and writing about it.

## BOOK REVIEW



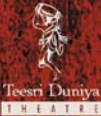
### AIDA JORDÃO

is currently a PhD candidate at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Toronto, on a hiatus from her true identity as a director and playwright of popular theatre (radical and political). She has "committed" feminist plays with Nightwood Theatre and the Company of Sirens, Theatre of the Oppressed with labour and community groups in Ontario, and progressive performances in Portugal, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

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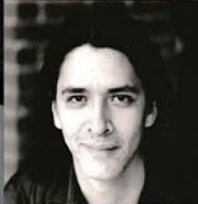



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
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# Whitehorse's "Theatre of the Voice"

BY STEPHANIE LAMBERT



© Rick Massie Photography / Genevieve Doyon, Sam Bergmann-Good, Sarah Moore, Shaune McComb, Adele Gigantes, and Jessica Hickman in *Open Pit*  
© Ruth Borgfjord / Hazel Venzone in *Embrace*  
© Bruce Barrett / PJ Prudat in *Cafe Daughter*

I am interested in the interaction between theatre, morality, and voicelessness. Whitehorse is the home of what I refer to as "Theatre of the Voice," a theatre that addresses the issue of "what" and "who" have not been heard in the community. By using this specific type of socially engaged art, theatre makers in this Northern community have fostered what John C. Gibbs, a professor of developmental psychology, calls the "social perspective taking" that is necessary to "moral development and behaviour" (1). In this article, I will present the signs of such theatre produced by local companies in Whitehorse.<sup>1</sup>

I understand voicelessness in three ways: first, it is not finding or having the power to speak up/give your opinion; second, it is being a specific voice that is not represented in the public sphere; and third, it is not having the ability to make sounds or to use language. The

third category is perhaps, by its nature, embedded in the first and second. Babies, for example, can't voice an opinion; and those who are mute are less likely to be represented in the public sphere, including the stage. But I suggest that these three tiers of voicelessness are amalgamated in what Whitehorse's Theatre of the Voice has been working towards addressing over the past thirty years, primarily through professional companies.

But what does such a theatre look like in practical terms?

Nakai Theatre's 2011 world premiere of *The River* (by Judith Rudakoff, David Skelton, and Joseph Tisiga) is an apt object of study in this regard. It presented twelve marginalized voices, portraying them as "shadow people moving on a ghost landscape" (68). Five actors performed the stories of such characters as Archie, a part First

Nation, middle-aged man living on the street; Kirsten, a white youth; and Buzz, a twenty-seven-year-old First Nation "watcher": an observant, transient man of the community. Through a structure of episodic monologues and dialogues, these characters share what it feels like to be invisible in a very demanding society. Archie must not expect respect or love; must not be sensitive toward or become attached to people, despite his needs; must not be gay or associate with gays; and must not like "Indians." Society demands that Kirsten must follow the fashion of technology, please others, and seek to be liked (at the expense of her opinions, her comfort, and her sexual health). Trapped in the consequences of their past and what has been expected of them, neither of these characters values their own thoughts, concerns, or feelings. As Kirsten concludes, "I want to ask where we're going, but I don't want to jinx this. Just shut up and walk, I tell myself" (13). With this



feeling of powerlessness, they wander in Whitehorse on a shifting landscape, shown through Buzz's observations as he talks of his displaced people:

We started at Whiskey Flats, then we had to move, and now it's just a place for tourists.

From Whiskey Flats we got moved to The Shipyards, and now there's a parking lot and a crap market.

From The Shipyards to Sleepy Hollow then to the marsh and now up the hill.

Different clans that hate each other, all living together.

Fathers fucking daughters.

Traces of our lives get left behind in each place. No one sees us when we are there. Why would they see us when we're gone. (27)

In *The River*, we are affected by the toughness of life and inspired by the vast natural environment. This is not a typical "Broadway"-type story. It expresses complex, local voices that have varying cultural perspectives; these voices are meaningful in a close political and cultural context.

This production is part of what I call Theatre of the Voice. It has sustained, quite remarkably, a consistent approach in engaging with "those we don't hear" through several dimensions. First, it engages through the *script* and its content, as we have briefly seen. The second dimension of engagement is *collaboration*: *The River* was a statement of cultural diversity in itself, involving a team that included a First Nations

director (Michael Greyeyes), a cast and crew of Anglo and Franco-Canadians and First Nations, and a Romanian-Canadian marketing director and producer. This type of theatre also engages voicelessness through the *production*, which in the case of *The River* involved the risky act of putting what might be viewed as "difficult issues" on stage in a community with less than 28 000 inhabitants. The fourth and final dimension of engagement is the *delivery*; one of the performances of *The River* was at the Salvation Army shelter. It offered the opportunity for dialogue with the very people the play was about, and perhaps also a confirmation of the self, which is so fundamental to individual and collective development (Parent 12). In a particularly powerful moment, in a scene where Archie had passed out on the floor, one audience member walked into the acting area and used his own coat to cushion Archie's head. Through this empathetic recognition, a bridge was built between fiction and reality, opening wide the doors for an interaction between theatre and real life moral behaviour.

Gibbs writes that "social perspective taking relates to the right and the good of morality, that is, to justice or mutual respect and empathy or caring" (1). Through the theatre's associative experiences, people can evolve in their personal understanding of the world and of others. The more aware people are of the "right" and the "good," the more we can hope to see right and good actions done, as we saw with the audience member at the Salvation Army shelter. If these positive actions can change a play's rehearsed course of action, then so can they change the world. In brief, we

could describe such a theatre as seeking a quality of voice that showcases the margins, rather than the larger machine, of society .

Although Theatre of the Voice can be fun, it is not driven by an end goal of entertainment. Its practitioners often seem rather resentful of Theatre for Entertainment; this is something they will have to make peace with if they want to best serve the people of Whitehorse. The stakes of these two genres seem to be unequal, and the makers of Theatre of Voice may wonder: "Where are the true connections?" Because such art often goes against the current, those who practise it are confronted with a sense of isolation and financial burden: "If I do a difficult question-raising play or an experimental one in my small town, can an audience of a 100 people justify the expenses of the production? Or even 350 people? How will funders ever approve it? But then, if I don't ask the questions, who will?" These artists are plagued by doubts: fearing that their audiences will not relate to the tradition of theatre, or that they won't see it as a way to deal with local issues or to document their lives.

Theatre of the Voice can be hard-hitting, breaking down the fourth wall of theatre to collaborate with the community. It can seek healing, re-appropriation, confirmation (of the self or the collectivity), inclusion, denunciation, dialogue, rectification, recognition and truth. It can't, however, ask its audience to approbate its artistic sophistication. Nevertheless, through the awareness that beauty and innovation can allow us to approach a situation from different

© Richard Legner / Ayma Letang and Wayne Ward in *The River*



angles, this type of theatre creates “bridges” for the people of Whitehorse: engaging them in more dialogue, more social perspective taking, and perhaps challenging the status quo.

It is through persistence and sacrifices that such art has survived in Whitehorse. Against all odds, Celia McBride (co-artistic director of Sour Brides, with Moira Sauer) wrote *So Many Doors*, a play about the death of two children set in the North, co-produced it with Sauer in town (with Nakai Theatre), and toured it across Canada. Playwrights and co-artistic directors of Gwaandak Theatre, Leonard Linklater and Patti Flather, have for over thirteen years searched to portray “more Aboriginal stories and more stories from outside the mainstream; woman, people from the North, people from different cultures, different sexualities [and abilities]” (Linklater). They have produced and toured many shows<sup>2</sup>: One of these was their own co-written play, *Sixty Below* (co-produced with Nakai and the Society of Yukon Artists of Native Ancestry), which was based on the stories of Aboriginal people living on the street of Whitehorse battling addictions, making efforts to stay out of the justice system, and trying to reclaim some of their cultural identity. Another play they produced was *Café Daughter* by Kenneth T. Williams, the story of Chinese-Cree Yvette and her handling of ethnic shame in the 1950s and 1960s in rural Saskatchewan.

More recently, co-artistic producers Jessica Hickman and Sam Bergmann-Good have launched a new theatre company, Open Pit, through which they’ve produced (and acted in) the first step of their Devised Yukon Project. In *Nowhere Near* (2011), they used physical actions as much as words to present a play about six people surviving a bus crash “outside, in an isolated Territory” (Hickman). Through this production, Hickman, Bergmann-Good and four other creators and actors demanded to be free in style and searched to rectify a falsely conveyed image of the Yukon Gold Rush era projected by the tourist industry. These artists asked: Was Robert Service’s poetry ever meant to be associated with can-can dancers? Was the Gold Rush a glamorous time?

Another example of this theatre was seen in Joseph Tisiga’s one-man show *Grey Owl* at Nakai Theatre’s Pivot Festival of 2009. In this play, he re-appropriated the persona of “Grey Owl,” parodying

famed Englishman Archie Belaney, who in the 1900s pretended to be Aboriginal and took the name “Grey Owl.” Local designer Linda Leon described Tisiga’s performance: “[Joseph] bought himself some cheap tanning solution from Shoppers to make himself browner only it turned out orange .... He bought air freshener because he wasn’t actually allowed to smudge on stage ... so he was going around the performance space spraying air freshener .... It was pretty funny” (Leon).

Whitehorse’s Theatre of the Voice doesn’t always have to be expressed through new scripts. Arlin McFarlane and Eric Epstein, who co-directed the theatre company Separate Reality during the late 1980s, produced *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig. This show can be seen as an effort to change the prevailing social mindset: “There were letters in the papers about teachers being homosexual and how that would be bad for our youth ... [and] I thought that it was just important for people to see the humanity in people” (McFarlane). A similar goal was seen in the Guild’s<sup>3</sup> community production of *The Laramie Project* (by Moisés Kaufman and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project) in 2010. Similarly, the Yukon Educational Theatre’s original mandate of “public Legal education contracts” can be also considered as representing Theatre of the Voice. Since the late 1970s, the company has produced and toured plays about “alcohol awareness, mock courts to train community JPs, [and] sex education” (Dray).

In spite of this presence, it seems as though Theatre of the Voice is battling to survive. One might wonder why this is. Why is it that the community theatres in Whitehorse mainly produce mainstream plays from the “canon”? After being posed this question, Celia McBride replied: “Perhaps when one comes from a smaller community one is more likely to feel that his or her voice is not important. Perhaps there aren’t enough encouraging mentors. I think this is changing now. Nakai is being proactive in developing local voices.”

Has voicelessness in the community supported voicelessness on stage? Are people afraid to confront themselves? Do they just not care? Why is it easier to draw the public to shows focused on entertainment than those making difficult inquiries? Is it because life is hard enough in the first place that one doesn’t want to experience the suffering of others? Or

has hope been lost? Is theatre accessible enough? Is it inviting?

In the face of all these questions, one must remember that many people in the general public have not been exposed to theatre enough or to a “contemporary aesthetic.” Theatre of Voice can only persist in inviting people, and aim to avoid resenting those who don’t “get” meaningful theatre making. Fortunately for the Whitehorse population, Nakai has been reaching out to local voices. Since 1979, it has developed and produced unheard voices, staging, among others, plays “dealing with contact between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people and traditions” (D’Aeth 1). The company encouraged the creation of new works at the 24 Playwriting Competition (such as *Sixty Below*). Some of these works surfaced at Nakai’s bi-annual Homegrown Theatre Festival: a hugely important forum for developing local voices over the past ten years. Some of these have also been featured at the Nakai’s annual Pivot Theatre Festival, which presents a selection of bold plays from local, national, and international artists such as the aforementioned *Grey Owl* by Tisiga; American performance artist Taylor Mac’s *The Be(A)st of Taylor Mac*, in which he used drag to “describe the culture of fear in the United States created by George W. Bush” (Skelton); and Vancouver artist Hazel Venzone’s *Embrace*, a “big cooking show” with the Filipino community and particularly relevant to cultural diversity, morality, and voicelessness.

Venzone, while building her thirty minute Verbatim piece (trying to understand her relationship with her mother, a first generation Filipino in Winnipeg), discovered that the Filipino community did not have a voice on stage: “Nothing had ever, ever been shown about the Filipino community there so they felt a huge sense of honour and have invited me back. I gained a big, big amount of their trust which I didn’t anticipate ... Not because I didn’t respect them or the piece but I just didn’t know that that sense of trust would come shortly after” (Personal interview). She went back for Pivot 2012 because she thought, “Everyone deserves a voice.” She gave a two-week long workshop on “How to reveal yourself” to ten Filipino cooks. They then told their stories of integration on stage. When asked why she chose food as a theme, she responded that it was the method that made her interviewees feel most comfortable. We can see that *Embrace* reflects the same criteria of



Theatre of the Voice as seen previously with regard to *The River*, although with some variants:

It engaged through the *script*, which showcases narratives of local Filipino cooks never before heard on stage. It used *collaboration*: the performers and director were Filipinos, and Nakai's team, hosting the festival, was composed of Anglo-Canadians and Romanian-Canadians. The three performances were constructed with on-stage participation of the audience that was divided as follows: Filipino community (30%), theatre patrons (45%), and new audience / Yukon residents (25%) (Venzone "re: photos"). The dimension of *production* was seen in *Embrace*'s risky act of staging what might be viewed as "culturally specific" and "experimental" in a town of less than 28 000 inhabitants with an estimated community of 2000 Filipinos. *Embrace* also engaged through the *delivery*: the performance was set at the Yukon Inn Fireside Room, a location that desacralized theatre. Audience members were invited to participate actively in the formation of the event: they could sign-up to have a culinary lesson on stage with the chefs or to sing Karaoke as part of the production. Projections ensured the general audience would hear stories (of integration) shared, while Venzone "kept the ball in the air" with a microphone.

We could further add another dimension of engagement to this event: *active involvement with the community*. Although Theatre of the Voice has mainly been brought forth by professional theatres, on a few occasions professional artists are actively hands on *with* the community to create new works. In this approach, artists don't put the stories of common people on stage; they go on stage with the people and their stories. Because the "performing community member" is integrated with the "viewing community member," these events when well executed carry with them a shared happiness for the audience, which is now "part of the gang" rather than "being told so by the other gang." Therefore, a heightened sense of equality is installed in the artistic dialogue; it is from the "levelled inclusiveness" of this experience that the active involvement with the community draws its power. It is about a desire to feel "in" something and accepted for who you are. It is also about wanting to learn. Perhaps the reason *Embrace* received such positive feedback in the artist's survey of the event was because it responded best to

these needs and desires: "There should be more community events that include everyone—this show was a perfect example"; "The stories from the cooks opened my eyes"; and "This event helped me build relationships with new people."

Another example of such collaborative endeavours between professional artists and the community is Gwaandak Theatre's *Tell Me More...* (2009), which Patti Flather created in collaboration with the Ynklude troupe (a group formed in 2005 with the aim of including people with and without disabilities on stage). The devised show was built using the creative input of all performers, forming a story of transformation with songs and physical actions. Director Brian Fidler stated, "If Patti wasn't putting together those shows or bringing that group together along with other people, they wouldn't be on the stage." Again, here we see signs of a kind of teaching born out of a need for particular groups to be heard and confirmed as part of the community. Although this is not the only way for Theatre of the Voice to exist, it is probably its most gentle rendition—and some respond best to gentleness.

All of these productions mentioned above are clearly the results of artists wanting to see "right" and "good" exist in their society. They have asked people, year after year, to find the power to speak up, and they have provided examples of how to do it. They have striven to represent greater diversity and more stories, to increase the level of empathy in their society, and thus they incite action. Theatre is accountable for its moral choices and its moral repercussions: from the selection of a script or voice to how it is produced, by whom, and why. Theatre of the Voice thus understands that theatre making should be approached with a great sense of responsibility.

#### NOTES

- 1 Although the Yukon Arts Centre has had a major cultural impact in Whitehorse since the 1990s by fostering a space for touring shows and bringing new and unconventional work by nationally recognized companies, I've restricted the focus of this article to local theatre companies.
- 2 They mainly toured in the Yukon, but also in the NWT.
- 3 The Guild is a community theatre founded in 1980. It was voted "favorite theatre company in the Yukon" in a *North of Ordinary* magazine survey in 2012.

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