

Responsible Arts Practice and The Vancouver Downtown Eastside Community Play

By Savannah Walling

*The hearts from the past beat in the hearts that are now,
and two makes four, and four, makes eight, and so on,
till the heart of our community knows that it beats on and on.*

From *In the Heat of a City*, the Downtown Eastside Community Play¹

In the fall of 2003, our company, Vancouver Moving Theatre, produced a community play for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Although we've worked in interdisciplinary and community related performing arts for over 20 years, this was our first experience in creating this style of community play. The responsibilities turned out to be daunting, yet inspiring. It was the best project of our career. And we felt like we were pushing a two ton ball up Mount.Everest. If we let go before reaching the top, the ball would roll back and crush us.

I've lived in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, since I was blown north to Canada by the winds of life and the Vietnam War. Located on a spit of land in Burrard Inlet, the Downtown Eastside is often called Canada's poorest postal code. Culturally rich and culturally diverse, it is one of Canada's least understood and most publicized locations.

First Nations people have lived here for over 2000 years. It is the birthplace of the city of Vancouver. It has been an entry point for immigrants and young families, a retirement home for resource workers, a haven for middle class professionals who value sustainability over growth, and a sanctuary for artists and the marginalized.

For over a hundred years, people have gathered at the Carnegie Building on Hastings and Main to find lost friends, catch up on the news and connect with the community. Originally built with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation as Vancouver's public library, the building is now a community centre, a vibrant "living room" for the Downtown Eastside.

The Carnegie Community Centre is surrounded by a tightly packed neighborhood of 16,000 people - distinctive, fluidly shifting,

overlapping mini-communities of families and singles, housing and industry, shops and parks. Each street is a different neighborhood, filled with people from different walks of life, circumstances and culture. Lots of interesting people doing different things make each block an interesting place to live. One third of the residents are of Asian origin. 70% of Vancouver's First Nations people live in the Downtown Eastside. Residents value their heritage and their socio-economic and cultural diversity. The neighborhood has a long history of fighting for social justice and for recognition as a residential community eclipsing its old image as "skid road".

But although it is tremendously strong and united in some ways, the Downtown Eastside is fractured and alienated in others. It is a divided community whose groups don't readily interact because of the mistrust, fear and indifference that stem from language, cultural and socio-economic differences. An inner-city location means inner-city problems: hard times, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, urban predators, drug dealing, an HIV epidemic, as well as the pressures of gentrification and urban development. We face not only harm caused by poverty and society's larger social

problems, but the stigmatizing of individuals and a whole community. Still, after years of struggles – against demolitions, incompatible new construction, being treated as a “dumping ground” for the larger city’s social problems – the community survives. We love our neighborhood.

For thirty years, the Downtown Eastside has been home to myself and my husband and colleague Terry Hunter. It’s the community that gave birth to our art, to our company and professional practice, and in which we gave birth to our son. This home nourished and anchored our artistic work and exposed us to a host of inspiring artistic influences from many cultural traditions.

Over the last twelve years, we’ve spiraled back home to work again for our neighborhood: creating theatre productions and music concerts, school shows, open air shows, workshops and six years of the Strathcona Artist at Home Festival. These events express our love for our Downtown Eastside home, our respect for its cultural treasures and ancestors, and our pride in the art forms, history, artists and residents of a remarkable community. Perhaps that’s why the winds of fate, along with the urging of the Carnegie Community Centre, saw to it that we produce this community play for the Downtown Eastside as the culminating event of Carnegie’s one-hundredth anniversary celebration.

Standing on the Shoulders of Those Who’ve Gone Before

Over the years, we’ve supported – and learned from – Downtown Eastside community building projects by theatre artists like Marie Clements, John Juliani and Jay Hamburger.

Carnegie’s vision for the Downtown Eastside was inspired by a form of community play discovered in Britain in the 1970s by playwright Ann Jellicoe and brought to Canada by Dale Hamilton. Canadian adaptations of the form have been produced in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Enderby, B.C. (The Enderby Community Play, in fact, inspired the creation of the Downtown Eastside Community Play.) We, in

turn, were artistically excited about trying out a new form of theatre. (We got lots of advice enroute from Enderby’s Cathy Stubington and Ontario’s Ruth Howard.)

In this kind of community play, a small core of experienced theatre artists work with community members (as many as want to participate) to create an artistic work of the highest achievable standard to express and celebrate their community – a play for and by the community. The artists are responsible for relating to the whole community, working in partnership with the existing systems, and refraining from taking sides on divisive issues. The artist’s job is not to tell people what to think, but to listen and learn from the community and look for opportunities for people to create art and get involved – because the more they help, the more interested they are.

Accepting the Invitation to Serve

We knew the task was too big, the time line too short, and the resources on hand insufficient. But we also knew the Downtown Eastside has tremendous talent. We knew the community’s problems have been sensationalized in the Canadian media and its rare gifts ignored. We knew it was our turn to serve to the best of our ability. The vision was inspiring – and terrifying.

The pressures to succeed were immense. As aboriginal community actor Stephen Lytton said, “(The) production was an enormous task, being where it’s coming from. And the failure of it would have been far more damaging because of where it’s come from. It was like carrying the weight of the whole community on your shoulders.”²

Terry and I live in the Downtown Eastside. We couldn’t leave after the play finished. We would have to live with the consequences: if our work fell short, the whole community would pay – not just us. What if our efforts shed an even worse light on the Downtown Eastside and the talents and potential of its residents? We needed all the help we could get. It came slowly and it came in many forms – advice from the Enderby

community and lots of in-kind help from the Downtown Eastside community. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, “There was tremendous collective will to make it happen. We were creating something historic that was important to the neighborhood. It was important to hear a play that was powerful and spoke to the neighborhood in a truthful voice.”³

Our community play turned into an epic year-long event that involved over two thousand volunteers, fifty three organizations and twenty-five professional artists in every aspect – research and sharing stories; processions and skill-building workshops (43 in all); building costumes, puppets and sets; helping backstage; and performing. The project scale strained our small “mom and pop” company. It strained the play’s resources. It strained our marriage. It strained our relationship with our son, whom I home school. Everyone involved was over-extended and over-worked. There were so many different responsibilities we juggled, from small to enormous, that we often had to remind ourselves we were only creating a play.

Defining the Boundaries

Our first responsibility was to make sure that we and our co-producing partner were climbing the same mountain. (It took a month to work out the details.) We agreed to operate according to the purpose and principles outlined by the Carnegie Centre (and to share these ideas with the artistic team). We agreed to celebrate the Downtown Eastside community’s past, portray its present in all its variety and share visions for the future. Focusing on issues the community thinks are important and giving voice to those who live there, we were to build new connections in a shared experience that bridged the neighborhood’s diverse cultural and socio-economic groups. We agreed to hire a culturally diverse team of artists that included women (and East End residents) in leadership positions, to develop capacity in the arts, and to support the community in making art. As part of the larger purpose of improving

perceptions about the neighborhood, we were to get media and the larger community out to the play. We had to help fund-raise for the play and keep the project on budget and well managed. We agreed to balance process and product, and leave behind archives of the process, materials, and production. We agreed to create a play about the whole Downtown Eastside: from Gastown to Main and Hastings, from Chinatown to Strathcona, from Japantown to Luq’luq’i and Victory Square.

We were also responsible for meeting Vancouver Moving Theatre’s artistic mandate. We set out to create a meaningful, accessible show that engaged people’s hearts, minds and imaginations, and to this end we had to tailor the event for this unique community. Our theatre strives to stimulate new art through the interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange of ideas. Sometimes we put student and community performers onstage with professional performers. And of course, we would strive to deliver professional service, quality and value while working with an attitude of partnership, cooperation and respect.

The artistic goals of this particular play gave rise to further responsibilities. Our task was to write a musical play honouring the people and history, struggles and triumphs, cultures and art forms of the Downtown Eastside. To this end, we planned to research significant events and experiences via an outreach program that would involve hundreds of people. We worked slowly and carefully to build in structures from inception to presentation for community input, participation, art making, coaching and mentoring.

Finding the “Cooks”

In response to the community’s need for cultural representation, we hired a team of four writers: Renae Morrisseau (who focused on First Nations experience), James Fagan Tait (who co-wrote the Enderby community play and represented the community play legacy), myself (who focused on historical events and local context) and Adrienne Wong (who focused on Chinese experience). Our

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first responsibility was to establish a collaborative process for generating new material, sharing images and ideas, crystallizing themes and creating narrative. We would retell stories heard over and over again and make up new stories inspired by real people, and then distill the script to stories of struggle and triumph that insisted on being heard today. The writers needed to create a truthful and coherent script incorporating and interweaving as many voices, stories, songs and perspectives as possible, and including an unlimited number of characters for up to a hundred actors.

The writers of the play have resisted the temptation to churn out a political manifesto and instead have created a gentle, and often poetic work that nonetheless has at its heart a steel core of determination and strength. There is a sense in the air that magic, and maybe even history, is being made.

John Endo Greenaway

Vancouver Moving Theatre was responsible for assembling a strong team of artists who knew the neighborhood, were good at what they did, understood and enjoyed collaborative process, and had experience guiding and enthusing community volunteers: director James Fagan Tait, composers Wyckham Porteous and Joelysa Pankanea, design diva Marina Szijarto and assistant designer Tamara Unroe – plus lighting designer Itai Erdal. On a more mundane but still challenging level, we had to find a hall large enough to house a cast of nearly 100 (the Japanese Hall), convert the empty hall into a theatre, build a set to fill the hall and clothe over one hundred and ninety characters.

From the beginning we were on a treadmill faster than we were. It was like doing about 15 plays, each with its own theme, concept and visual style. If I had known how much work it was going to be, I wouldn't have done it. I'm so glad I didn't know how much work it would be, but I was so glad I was a part of it.

Marina Szijarto, design diva

Following the Recipe

And finally, overall, we were responsible for mounting the play effectively and doing our best to provide everyone involved with a positive experience.

With regard to our co-workers, Terry and I were responsible for providing an achievable plan of duties with clear priorities and goals, resources to fulfill the tasks, and follow-through on ideas and plans. We were responsible overall to admit to our mistakes and – to the best of our ability – to do no harm. We knew we had to be mindful of the consequences when we were making choices – some could help and some could harm. Decisions needed to fit our intentions, our resources, and our community. We tried to make our choices transparent, to acknowledge all help, to admit our mistakes, to do our best to do no harm, to let things happen slowly and when in doubt to compromise. We knew every person we met had something important to teach.

We also had responsibilities with regard to the neighborhood. We needed to consult with the community (providing Chinese translation whenever we could) to determine subject matter, themes, music and presentational styles. We incorporated the community's feedback to make sure the language and stories had the ring of truth, were culturally respectful, historically accurate, and honestly portrayed the Downtown Eastside. In all this, we had to honour the neighborhood's unique social, historical and physical characteristics; to witness without judgment and respect what it takes to survive in hard times; and to give voice in a non-intrusive way to social issues that come up over and over again. We had, in short, to look at harsh realities without overlooking the "phoenix in the ashes". Our community needed to see and recognize itself in the play and production.

I'm glad that good issues were dealt with in this play: emotional, cultural and racial. The play was therapeutic. It was acknowledgement for me that the history took place. Not just Chinese history but Canadian history. I loved the fact that there were different

backgrounds in the production.

Elwin Xie, Community play actor

The more people helped, the more they were interested. The more they were interested, the more we were able to accomplish and the stronger grew our art.

Baking the Cake

Finally the first miracle happened. Four writers' voices and hundreds more voices from the Downtown Eastside's past and present wove together into a meaningful and coherent creation.

Over the course of the play, a young native woman arrives in the Downtown Eastside from Bella Bella to carve out a new life for herself. While she looks for her missing Aunt Rita and a job, she encounters the life and times of the Downtown Eastside past and present. These encounters help her to make discoveries about living and dying, as she prepares for a life filled with hope. A wild joy ride through 100 years of laughter and tears brings to light tales of ordinary people doing extraordinary things to survive in hard times.

As we moved into rehearsals and the building of the play, we were responsible for hundreds of volunteers. We had to provide a safe and confidential place for sharing stories. We needed to cope respectfully with difficult issues involving security and inclusion/exclusion so we could provide a safe working environment for all, ensuring that everyone was treated with respect in every circumstance. We had to design a fun, friendly, welcoming, and smoothly running environment for rehearsals and building sets and props. We had to introduce participants to a theatre vocabulary and professional protocols.

The mentorship of Jimmy (Tait) is amazing. His leadership shows the balance between compassion and constructive criticism. He keeps everyone together and no one is left out. Everyone is given an opportunity to shine.

James Krotez, community actor

It's absolutely wonderful I got professional training for free. I am doing something that I really enjoy doing and I get to do it for free!

Hannah Walker, 12-year-old
community play actor

I woke up singing songs from the play. Even when talking with other cast members, we'd naturally include lines from the play.

Luke Day, community play actor

I met and learned from many people from all walks of life and from all over the world. I realized I am not the only one facing discrimination from the mundane society of Vancouver. I gained strength and courage to perform the role of 'Nicole' for the community. Yah, I raise my hands in honoring my son, the cast and crew and writers of the play.

Priscillia Tait, community play actor

Organizing rehearsals with volunteers was an enormous logistical challenge; it was like marshalling an army over an obstacle course when you never knew for sure which soldiers would return for the next day's battle. (Opening night was the first time that all the cast showed up on the same night.) Vancouver Moving Theatre was responsible for providing three months worth of healthy snacks on a limited budget for an unpredictable number of volunteers (some of them in great need) and bringing in tangible benefits as play resources improved (two cast suppers, four weeks of child care, complimentary tickets, and an archival DVD of the show). And after the show, we had to provide transition events to close the circle on the project in a helpful way and ease the inevitable post-production let-down.

The cast and crew were volunteers between the ages of six and sixty: students, parents and educators, service professionals and unemployed, people on disability and retired seniors, people in and out of recovery, artists and a Franciscan sister.

They are volunteers. They're unpaid. As professionals in a community play, we have to be fully prepared at

each rehearsal, to support and speak with respect to the cast members at every step of the process, to work out differences with members of the artistic team at another time and place (without intruding on the rehearsal process).

James Fagan Tait, community play director

The responsibilities were large and multi-faceted. From day one, the idea of a community play evoked both excitement and negativity. We faced distrust (of new money, new faces, and big budget projects) and suspicion (of “poverty pimps” and “make-work” projects). We met tensions (between cultural groups, between neighborhoods, between “haves” and “have-nots”) and resentment (toward foreign community play models that employ some and expect others to volunteer). Over the year, we stumbled onto bad memories, bad dreams and bad feuds. We faced language, literacy, economic and cultural barriers, and issues of food, poverty, legal and illegal drugs, safety and security. In order to make the play a familiar, welcoming and intriguing presence in the community and to build a web of support, we hired an outreach team who lived or worked in the Downtown Eastside’s historical neighborhoods and understood their concerns. We met with people and organizations to learn how we could work with them and what they could bring. We attached play-related events to existing programs and provided excellent and accessible skill-building workshops. In short, we did our best to meet distrust, suspicion and resentment with respect and patience, and provide a safe and inviting public event where people could socialize and enjoy creative activity.

I had responsibilities to my son, to my family and to myself that required raising up protective boundaries. As a home-schooling mother, I reserved time to work with my son daily and get him to his classes. I had suppers to prepare and a home to care for. I preserved 3-4 hours of daily solitude to make sure I had time (and inner clarity) to research and co-write the play. I tried – and almost succeeded – in maintaining my physical health throughout the project. I had

to maintain my emotional health....

These responsibilities were enormously challenging. We drew on the experience of over thirty years of professional and community work. We learned on the job. We didn’t always succeed. We worked as hard as we could for one year, but nothing we could do was enough—ever. We could have/should have/wanted to have met more people, talked to more people, and involved more people.

We worked too fast. We created a project that normally takes 2-3 years in just one. We took nine weeks to rehearse the kind of community play that normally takes twelve. Relationships take time to build. Trust takes time to grow. As organizing committee member Bob Eberle said, “You realized how fragile the thing was and the huge damage if it had failed.”

The experience was not perfect for the participants. Some felt the volunteers should have been paid. As participant coordinator Leith Harris reported, some feelings were hurt and some people got lost along the way. Some people did not like their assigned lines, or did not understand the English, or could not read and were too shy to say. Some people misplaced their schedules or scripts. Some did not have phones and messages went astray. Some did not like the food. Others were disappointed or felt betrayed when a song was cut. Some things went missing. When security and issues of inclusion and exclusion arose, creative, respectful, effective solutions had to be found.

Nor was the experience perfect for the artists. The artistic team were all over-worked and needed two more weeks of rehearsal and more staff—including a chef! Sometimes people got sick. People did not always get along. Sometimes they did not have enough resources or experience for the task at hand, or they were not as prepared as they should have been. And sometimes their vision was bigger than the available resources.

People faced family emergencies, plumbing problems, computer crashes, accidents, deaths, robberies, evictions, alcohol and drug issues, mental health and personality issues, and

many economic barriers. But, as participant co-ordinator Leith Harris wrote in a poem published in the January 15, 2004 issue of The Carnegie Newsletter:

*The genuine caring
and generous sharing
of time, energy and knowledge
made it all worthwhile and more.*

When serious concerns emerged, cast members brought them to the producers as respectful petitions. Cast and artists were careful to protect the show and the rehearsal process.

At night the 400 block on Alexander Street can feel like hell... In many of these doorways, human beings huddle. But stepping into the brightly lit Japanese Language School is a kind of deliverance. A theatre rehearsal involving dozens of people is underway and everyone is gentle, friendly and purposeful. The contrast is so startling that these folks might as well be wearing wings... I wonder aloud what keeps 100 unpaid participants coming back day after day and the answer comes: people feel that they own the project and that they belong here.

Colin Thomas, the Georgia Straight

We must ensure that the powers that be are accountable to the community. But we, too, within the community, must hold ourselves accountable to our community and to those in leadership. We speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves and for those who are no longer here. Therefore each member of this community may play a part. We are the very heart and soul of the Downtown Eastside community.

Stephen Lytton, community actor

Serving the Feast

Finally the miracle was accomplished and the play went up. The audience was seated on either side of a long corridor: a set representing the Downtown Eastside's historic rolling hills. Valerie Method, Artist in Residence at the Roundhouse

Community Centre, wrote:

This show was extremely ambitious on all levels. It is the largest cast I have ever seen, not to mention the huge volume of fully executed costumes, larger-than-life sized props and set. I witnessed the importance of key artists remaining grounded around which goals could be realistically achieved. The final result was a production, more than anyone could have hoped for. The Downtown Eastside Community Play dazzled full houses, night after night in the Japanese Hall. In the Heart of the City was both a professional looking show and a very moving community play.

Valerie Method, Roundhouse
Community Centre

Mary Gazetas, for the Richmond Review wrote:

Powerful performances were mixed in with a theatrical inventiveness that drifted back and forth between the present and the past. There was a strong presence of young and elders, poetry and prayer, injustices and activism, laughter and circles of sadness. I sat among a group of Chinese, Spanish and First Nations people. We were strangers who after a while started talking to one another. I'd heard about the importance of community making people feel comfortable and welcome and being invited. This play was just that. I hope they keep on telling their stories.

Mary Gazetas, the Richmond Review

Each show was preceded by a pre-show fair hosted by a local community group. Each performance featured a different VIP cameo role, including Vancouver Mayor Larry Campbell. The play sold out seven of eight shows, and earned standing ovations.

Every night was full. A lot of people showed up. People go and have fun. They watch the play from the East Side. They enjoy it and want to come back again. We project to them the reality.

Roberto Garcia Roman, Community
Play Post Mortem Workshop

Everything worked wonderfully well: the lights, costumes, music, choreography and scripts. The actors portrayed their characters with conviction, spoke with passionate understanding and formed a strong, supportive team. I was so humbled to be in the presence of such strength and beauty, I cried for an hour after the first night.

Amazing, eh?

Such a wealth of talent gleaming under those lights

Like a buried chest suddenly flung open

A feast for the eyes and ears and heart

Honoring our proud history

In a perfect blend of laughter and tears and art

For almost two years

The Downtown Eastside Community Play phoenix has been rising from the flames.

Leith Harris, participant coordinator

The response to the play, by both those on the stage and those in the audience, illustrates how overwhelming the experience was.

We met the challenge. (W)e, as a people, came together and succeeded in that mandate of building bridges. The most magical thing – the sweetest part was that we had worked together. The bittersweet beauty of the love story came together and the whole production came together – united for one goal.

Stephen Lytton, community play actor

The play made me feel proud of working in the Downtown Eastside and being a member of Canada's lowest income neighborhood, and knowing so many talented and committed residents. I wouldn't trade anything for the experience and personal development which I had from those three months of working on the play.

Susan Poshan Wong, community play actor

“There are three things that will stand out in my memory forever,” said community actor Sister Victoria Marie, (1) graduating university with my BA; (2) making my profession of perpetual (final) vows; and, (3) participating in the com-

munity play.”

Marcy MacAulay, a Downtown Eastside resident, was full of praise:

The Downtown Eastside Community Play was powerful and humbling and magical and educational. Many of our friends, neighbors and my daughter's classmates were in it and loved it from the inside out. We loved it from the inside in. We wanted to see it twice, but it was sold out. Bravo!

An anonymous spectator wrote:

I was so excited to realize that these were not professionals, but people just like me, who came together to do their best, and their best was outstanding!

Sister Elizabeth Kelliher, Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement wrote:

There is a young fellow in our food line and one day he shouted out to me, ‘Sister, I’m going to be in the community play, come and see me.’ So I did. The next day in the line he asked me if I had seen him, and I was able to say I did and enjoyed his performance and the play very much. This play is a great gift to the neighborhood and should be replicated in all neighborhoods.

Audience member Alex Martin said:

Everyone in the production and audience experienced a sense of hope, faith and humanness. That was the miracle buzz of it. We all learned to walk on water with this unique play and experience culture as an inclusive faith. We became rooted together. Why did it work? For me, seeing hope and faith in people changed my life.

Joan Siedl, the Vancouver Museum’s curator of history, wrote to Vancouver Moving Theatre:

Thank you for so forcefully and beautifully making the point that our understanding of the past shapes

the way we can live in the present. I was riveted to my seat for every moment of the performance, astonished and delighted as you wheeled out, one after another, powerful and moving interpretations of the Downtown Eastside's history. Out of all the stories from the past that are out there, I think you chose some of the most important and most useful ones for us in the year 2003.

Jo Ledingham's review in The Vancouver Courier was likewise enthusiastic:

'In the Heart of a City' beats with vitality and hope... These funny and brave performers are proof that the courage and humour that kept Main and Hastings alive and kicking through the 19th and 20th centuries is still around.

Sandy Cameron, a play spectator wrote:

A vibrant DTES and 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 that their play reflects the strength, pain and beauty of our multicultural Downtown Eastside that rises like a phoenix from one generation to another.

Terry Hunter, the play producer wrote:

Working on this project was the best thing I have ever done in my life. It was a gift and an honour to participate. I learned so much about this community – its heart, its determination, its grit, its refusal to role over and die, its willingness to fight and fight for what it thinks is right. And I've gained such a huge respect for the people in this community who participated in the community play – so many of them have become my friends. I've come to see the enormous amount of talent they have, and what an incredible contribution they can make if given the chance.

Cleaning Up After the Party

After the run of eight shows was finished, the aftermath arrived. Some cast members felt lost. The artistic team was exhausted. I was burnt out, emptied. Our company had no plans for the future. Who had time to plan? We didn't know that wrapping up the play would consume one more year.

Big questions arose. When the consequences of failure are so immense, how ethical is it to commit to such an enormous project before you have the resources in place to pull it off? How ethical is it to do a big community arts project without some kind of sustaining follow-up? As organizing committee member jil p. weaving asked, "What do you do after the party leaves town and not everybody gets a goody bag?" Who does the follow-up? The artist? The community partners? The funding agencies? The community?

But what could we do? Carnegie is a community centre, not an arts producer. Vancouver Moving Theatre has middle-aged directors moving into new phases of personal practice.

One of the painful things about undertaking this project is letting it go. I wish I could wave a wand and give a job to everyone in the show who so desperately wants one. But I can't. I can only do so much.

Terry Hunter, play producer

This is what we've done. After the play ended, we organized a series of low-key transition events, including a thank you party, a post mortem workshop for participants, showings of the archival DVD and a PowerPoint display on the making of the play. We created an 8-panel display on The Downtown Eastside Community Play which is now on permanent display at the Carnegie Community Centre.

Finding New Recipes

Over the next year, we slowly began to recuperate. Carnegie Community Centre committed to

produce a community arts festival, create a 5-year community arts business plan, and try to set up an independent non-profit arts organization within two years. Terry Hunter, the executive director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, advised the community centre on these plans. Building on the community play's success and the trust it generated, Vancouver Moving Theatre agreed to co-produce (with Carnegie Community Centre) the first annual Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival which finished on October 24, 2004. Over 400 artists (most from the Downtown Eastside) performed in 65 events at over 25 locations. This time we paid honorariums to all the community artists. Festival events included a panel of community play participants (The Downtown Eastside Community Play - One Year Later), staged readings of three new original one-act plays and songs by local writers, as well as two days of information sharing and skill building workshops for local actors (Breaking into the Biz Forum).

From January 28 - February 6, 2004, we associate-produced (with NeWorld Theatre and PuSH International Performing Arts Festival) James Fagan Tait's adaptation of the novel *Crime and Punishment*. This play added five performers from the community play to a cast of fifteen professional actors. (The production received thirteen nominations and five Jessie awards including outstanding production, sound design, direction, costume design and innovation.) These events are Vancouver Moving Theatre's way of saying "thank you" to the enormously talented community who supported the Downtown Eastside Community Play.

Slowly we've been discovering that the Downtown Eastside Community Play has served as a catalyst for community arts practice in our community. Participants are organizing theatre and other projects and applying for theatre-related and arts-related jobs. Some community play veterans have progressed to ever more challenging volunteer and employment opportunities with local companies. New art projects, both within and outside the Downtown Eastside have been inspired by the community play. A new

yoga studio was inspired by the play to move into this culturally rich neighborhood. New projects are seeking Downtown Eastside actors and input from the community play team. Local playwrights are bringing new plays forward for development.

Participant coordinator Leith Harris observes:

Over a year later, I have close connections with the participants still. They are my friends, neighbors and co-workers. Being in the community play project has touched lives in profound ways from total career, life and style changes to increased career, friendship and love-connections.

This fall we've just co-produced (with Carnegie and the Association of United Ukrainians) our second annual Heart of the City Festival, which finished Nov. 11, 2005. Over four hundred artists (most from the Downtown Eastside) performed in over 100 events at over 40 venues. Libby Davies, our Member of Parliament, called it "a great array of arts, culture, music and soul searching". During the festival, Vancouver Moving Theatre presented the first few scenes of *The Shadows Project*, a new community shadow play for the whole family to shed light on addiction (this second project was inspired in part by a community shadow play on the theme of addiction created by the community of Enderby). Specially prepared lighting sources projected the shadows of puppets, scenery and masked and unmasked actors onto the screen from varying points in the expanse between screen and light. We worked with a giant 24 by 16 foot screen, a team of nine local writers, a community cast and crew and a live band. It is a Downtown Eastside style of theatre inspired by an ancient tradition of shadow theatre ("stunning, stark and startling all at the same time" wrote audience member Robyn Livingston in the Carnegie newsletter (Dec. 1, 2005)). This first phase of *The Shadows Project* was guided by professional artists, veterans of *The Downtown Eastside Community Play*, including co-writers Rosemary Georgeson, James Fagan Tait, Savan-

nah Walling, play director Tait, composer Joelysa Pankanea, and shadow effects designer Tamara Unroe. Almost 300 Downtown Eastside community members participated in public soundings, interviews, focus workshops and shadow theatre workshops. This time we're operating with a different community theatre model – an ensemble of 40 community participants who are paid honorariums. This year's public workshop presentations for feedback were followed by a Roots of Addiction forum investigating issues surrounding addiction. (The Shadows Project is scheduled to premiere in early 2007.)

The Downtown Eastside Community Play is still creating ripple effects. People in the Downtown Eastside are excited about the emerging community of artists and the circle of energy and hope. Community artists are excited about making and presenting all kinds of art and speaking about the community in their own voice. (Community play actor Grant Chancey ran for Mayor in Vancouver's 2005 election and garnered 200 votes.) They are looking for training, self-employment and job opportunities that will allow them to produce their art and live with dignity. We see increased pride and confidence, recommendations for cultural programming, policy and arts in action.

We see increased support for the Downtown Eastside Community Arts Network (CAN), a web of Downtown Eastside organizations who hope to make arts and culture an integral part of the economic and social renewal of the Downtown Eastside. They are working together to support community development and build personal and community capacities through art. We see recognition and support of community art as a powerful community building strategy.

We're deeply happy about all these developments that are creating a web of healthy relationships. But my husband and I remain middle-aged artist renting a home. We have neither a pension nor a regular income. We're wearing out. Our company does not have year-round staff. Carnegie Centre is not an arts producer. Honorariums don't provide a living. Temporary

injections of funding don't support sustainability. Poverty and homelessness, lack of housing, jobs and creative opportunities are still big problems in the Downtown Eastside. Our community still struggles for the right to define who we are and what kind of community we want to be.

But what is next? Whose responsibility is it?

I truly learned:

- *not to judge people by their appearance*
- *there is a wealth of talent in the Downtown Eastside*
- *people can live up to what you believe they can do as well as down to what you attribute to them*
- *there needs to be a strategy/program or something in place to continue to nurture the talents and skills that are in the Downtown Eastside*
- *under encouraging leadership, people can achieve wonders and work together harmoniously*

Victoria Marie, evaluator of the community play

The play's creation involved a 12 month community cultural development process:

- 43 public skill-building workshops
- 3 parades
- 11 story-collecting events
- 3 demonstrations by designers and musical directors
- 4 public readings of the script
- 9 weeks of rehearsals and building workshops leading up to 8 performances

Almost 2000 community volunteers participated in every aspect of the play:

- 12 worked on the play organizing committee
- 10 worked on the anniversary fund-raising committee
- 10 served as play patrons
- 454 assisted in story and costume research
- 1,195 participated in workshops
- 50 performed in parades
- 23 performed in play readings
- 92 helped to build and stage the show at rehearsals
- 81 performed in the cast

- 16 helped backstage and front of house
- 34+ helped at pre-show fairs and the opening ceremony
- 5 assisted in administration and promotion

Over 60 full time or part time employees were hired, including 25 professional artists:

- most lived in Vancouver's East End
- they came from culturally diverse backgrounds: Aboriginal, Afro-Canadian, Chinese, Japanese, East Indian, Metis, Hispanic, Israel, American and European origin (including Hungarian, Ukrainian and British Isles)

The Community play received financial and in-kind support from:

- 4 Downtown Eastside businesses
- 8 businesses elsewhere in the city
- 15 local organizations
- 15 external organizations
- 3 governments and/or civic agencies
- 5 councils and community foundations
- 1 university

The Community play received in-kind donations of services and materials from:

- 47+ individuals
- 53 organizations

Savannah Walling, Vancouver Moving Theatre,
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Savannah Walling is the Artistic Director of Vancouver Moving Theatre, a professional company she co-founded in 1983. Active in the performing arts for over 20 years as a writer, director, choreographer, interdisciplinary performer, stilt dancer, musician, lecturer and teacher, she has created over forty original works. She collaborates with performing and visual artists of many genres, techniques and traditions to create accessible interdisciplinary theatre influenced by Vancouver's Pacific Rim culture - over 2000 performances presented to over half a million audience members in Canada, the USA, Asia, Europe and Australia. In her role as Artistic Director of VMT, Ms Walling has written, directed or co-developed community based artistic projects tailored for Vancouver's Downtown Eastside Community - her inner city home for over 30 years. She co-founded the Strathcona Artist at Home Festival (1999-2004); oversaw artistic development of The Downtown Eastside Community Play (2003)-an epic year-long cultural development project that involved over 2,000 volunteers and 25 professional artists; she helped organize the 1st and 2nd annual Down Eastside Heart of the City Festivals (VMT/ Carnegie, 2004-2005), organized Breaking into the Biz Forum workshops for community artists (2004-2005) and oversaw artistic development of Though the People's Voice-showcasing three new one-act plays by local writers (2004). Currently, she oversees artistic development of The Shadows Project, a community shadow play with images and puppets about addiction for families (2005-2006). These projects create shared experiences that bridge diverse cultural traditions, socio-economic groups, and artistic disciplines.