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Everyone Is Welcome

This month, I want to bring your attention to **Ruth Howard**, Artistic Director of **Jumblied Theatre** in Toronto. I know the Canada, Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils, a small portion of Toronto's theatre community, and the sub-culture of Canadian community play practitioners are well aware of Ruth's accomplishments. But the vast majority of Ontario's theatre community and theatre-going public have probably never heard of Ruth and Jumblied Theatre. That's understandable as Ruth is an artist who, for the past eight to ten years, has been forging her own particular theatre career. I met with Ruth recently at her Ward's Island home to talk about her background and the work she is doing now.

I'd like to make a quick clarification before I continue. Above I mention "community play practitioners." This

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is not to be confused with community theatre. Community theatre is a term often used as more or less synonymous with amateur theatre. Community play refers to a form of theatre that originated in England and was imported to Canada in 1990 by writer Dale Hamilton in Rockwood, Ontario. The form generally involves a multi-year process leading to an epic-scale theatre production expressing local themes and history, with a philosophy of genuine social inclusion and a capacity for palpable social change.

Ruth says she "had the good fortune" to design costumes for the Rock-

wood community play: *The Spirit of Shivarree*. Her background was in theatre design, having graduated from the National Theatre School in 1986. The Rockwood production was a pivotal point in her theatre career. After designing several more community plays across Canada and in the U.K., she moved on from designing to creating and producing her own theatre and art projects both in Canada and England. "These grew bigger and bigger until I realized I would have to form a company to keep doing it." She remembers being at the Vital Links conference at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre in 1997. "There was one session that invited attending artists to speak about their work for five minutes each. I was more shy than about public presentations. But I got up, talked about and showed photos of the work I had been doing in schools and communities. Afterwards, to my surprise, I was approached by a number of arts producers and administrators who wanted to discuss ways that I might work with their organizations. This was another turning point: realizing that there was a tangible momentum in the direction I was going."

What was this direction? When I met Ruth in 2003, I knew nothing of the community play form but I had vaguely heard of the show in Rockwood that involved the whole town. I learned of her company, Jumblied Theatre. The name of the theatre comes from a lovely whimsical poem by Edward Lear. When she first briefly described the theatre she had been doing, I could not help thinking this was some sort of theatre where the aim became more social work than art: theatre that tried to help the participants, rather than create a finished show. This is a kind of stereotypical attitude that Ruth continuously has to fight against.

Fundamental to Ruth's work is an attempt to do theatre where neither the quality of the art, nor the politics of helping and including people, need to be mutually exclusive. "If we are not good artists, then what excuse do we have to be in communities occupying space and demanding people's precious time? If we don't offer what we are good at, then what are we? Inept social workers? Cultural day care centres? We must hold onto our artistic cores, however we experience this."

Ruth has taken her community play projects into several Toronto neighbourhoods: South Riverdale, Lawrence Heights, Davenport West and Central Etobicoke. Common to all of these geographical communities is a mixture of cultural backgrounds, and many recent immigrants and residents with below average incomes.



Ruth Howard, photo by Abby Callard

"Throughout all of these projects I have increasingly played with and adapted the British play model to suit my own artistic inclinations and the Toronto urban settings where I found myself. But some guiding principles have held fast. The most formative one is that everyone is welcome. In a community play everyone who auditions gets a part. I have always taken this notion literally, and much of my work has been the testing of its extremes and limitations, and the discovery of its aesthetic implications. If a project is conceived in a certain way, it is never too late for someone interested to join in. You just have to create a con-

continued on page 9

Everyone Is Welcome

continued from page 4

tainer that can keep expanding.”

From the fall of 2003 to May of 2004, I had the privilege of working with Jumblies Theatre on a Compass grant from the Ontario Arts Council. I occasionally got to watch Ruth in action during rehearsals and workshops. I once heard that a general manager never gets to focus on one particular area more than seven minutes at a time. I am not sure Ruth got even seven minutes. With warmth and calm she would greet each new person demanding her attention until she had sorted out what they wanted—often, for example, there were language difficulties—and how they could fit in with the ongoing tumult of activity. “Accommodating interruptions is at the heart of the process. I try not to say ‘come back later.’ Sometimes you have to, but part of what I do involves an impro-

Ruth talks about how tensions in this work can be seen as “complementary colours: process and product, aesthetics and ethics, virtuosity and inclusion, control and uncertainty, myself at the centre and myself at the side: this is our palette.”

While I came to utterly respect Ruth and the process of her work, I remained a bit sceptical about how successful the show would end up being. In May of 2004 there were to be eight performances of *Once a Shoreline* involving a cast of about one hundred, including local people of all ages, languages and ethnic backgrounds, a community choir, a youth choir, musicians, an opera singer and a few professional theatre artists. And that’s just the cast!

It turned out to be one of the most extraordinary nights I have ever had in the theatre. Enveloped with Wende Bartley’s multi-layered score of music, oral histories, and the tidal flow of waves, surrounded by scaffolding draped with colourful fabrics, I stood in the middle of a swirling parade of story-telling, dance, puppetry, time shifts, acrobatics, stilt-walkers; spectacle and intimacy. It was a magical experience. Such joy and passion from the performers and the crew. Talk about the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. Indeed, from the confusion and chaos of a multitude of participants from all levels of performing experience had come ART! Ruth proved to me that you can combine artistic integrity with social relevancy.

For the past two and a half years, Jumblies Theatre has been working in Central Etobicoke on the *Bridge of One Hair* project in partnership with Toronto Community Housing, Montgomery’s Inn and the Islington-Dundas neighbourhood. The cul-

mination of this residency will be six performances in Harbourfront Centre’s 2007 World Stage Festival from April 26 to 29. Tickets will be extremely limited as Jumblies has reserved a large portion of each performance’s seating for residents of their host Etobicoke community. Needless to say Jumblies is still looking for volunteers, maybe even participants. To inquire call 416-203-8428 or email info@jumbliestheatre.org.

I’ll leave you with another guiding belief of Ruth’s theatre. “Putting people together across differences is important for both what it creates and what it prevents.” And what is theatre, if not the coming together of people to share a performance?

Youth Theatre Training Program

Theatre Ontario is pleased to announce the latest recipients of training grants through Theatre Ontario’s Youth Theatre Training Program (YTTP), funded by the Ontario Arts Council. A total of \$23,000 was awarded to the following recipients:

- Carousel Theatre**, Empowering Adolescent Girls Through Theatre, St. Catharines
- Factory Theatre**, UnderCurrents, Toronto
- Jumblies Theatre**, Bridge of One Hair Youth Project, Etobicoke
- Native Earth Performing Arts**, Young Voices Program, Toronto
- Ottawa School of Speech and Drama**, Technical Training, Ottawa
- Soul Carnival**, Soul Carnival’s Youth Training Program, Warkworth
- Tarragon Theatre**, Spring Training Project, Toronto



Joy Douglas and Wanda Krane in the Jumblies public rehearsal of *Bridge of One Hair*, June 2004. Photo by Deb Barndt

visatory capacity to match a person within the project’s many needs, and to negotiate all kinds of behaviours. For the sake of other artists coming to work with Jumblies, I developed an orientation sheet expressing our guiding principles but also supporting the artists in dealing with difficult social situations and maintaining their own comfort levels.” In a talk for the Toronto Arts Council’s November 2006 Community Arts Symposium,