



# Collective Creation on the West Coast

By Jerry Wasserman

In the mid-1990s, Vancouver gave birth to three companies that have changed the face of theatre on the West Coast: Electric Company Theatre, Boca del Lupo and neworldtheatre. All three collectives have helped shape Vancouver's rich new theatrical ecology by virtue of their original, self-created work and unique performance protocols, reinvigorating what had been a pretty moribund local scene through the introduction of new styles of physical and political theatre, site-specific performance and innovative uses of theatrical technologies.

Electric Company's core members, Kim Collier, David Hudgins, Kevin Kerr and Jonathon Young, started the company as students in 1996. They all took classes at Langara College's Studio 58 theatre training program with Wendy Gorling, whose physically oriented mask work would result in her collaborations with Morris Panych on *The Overcoat* and other movement-based shows. The Electrics also cite the influence of playwriting instructor John Lazarus, who taught a class in writing the one-person show.

Kerr had stumbled on the story of Nikola Tesla, the Hungarian inventor who competed unsuccessfully with Thomas Edison to popularize electric light and power in the 1880s. The four decided to create a play out of Tesla's story for the Vancouver Fringe Festival and took the company name from its subject. They divided up their areas of research and collectively improvised around the material they brought back to the rehearsal room. Out of this process came *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (1996),<sup>1</sup> with authorship ascribed to Electric Company Theatre and no individual credited as director.

*Brilliant!* would echo through much of the Electrics' subsequent work in its subject matter, seen again in *The Score* (2000), a play about genetics that the company has also done as a film for CBC television; and in *Studies in Motion: The Hauntings of Eadweard Muybridge* (2006), about the nineteenth-century American experimental photographer. The process of creating *Brilliant!* made them aware of their individual strengths within the collective. Though all continue to share writing, directing and design duties, Kerr became the *de facto* head writer, Collier the primary director, Hudgins the key designer and Young variously involved in all those roles.

Their second show, *The Wake* (1999), again collectively researched and created, chronicles three generations of a fictitious family living on Vancouver's Granville Island as it evolves from a Native fishing camp into the industrial centre of the city. *The Wake* was

site-specific, staged outdoors on Granville Island itself and in False Creek, the body of water that separates the downtown peninsula from Granville Island. The Electrics' attraction to site-specific work derived from the fact that all but Hudgins grew up in Kamloops and attended nearby Caravan Farm Theatre. There they learned to love the theatricality of work presented *in situ*, as well as the surprise and excitement audiences exhibited outside the traditional theatrical environment. *The One That Got Away* (2002), a Holocaust story set in two swimming pools, and *The Fall* (2003), a play about labour relations, a love triangle and murder in a factory, brilliantly staged in a large abandoned warehouse, were continuations of their site-specific experimentation.



Rick Dobran and Sonia Norris in the Electric Company's *The Wake* at Granville Island/False Creek, Vancouver (May/June, 1999)

Photo By Tim Matheson

After its third show, though all the above works were collaboratively created, the company decided that it was time, as Collier explains, “to break [our] model and do something different. We wanted to find ways to create but not always be in the room together.”<sup>22</sup> Since then, Collier has done a great deal of freelance directing and Young a great deal of freelance acting, while Kerr went off and won the Governor General’s Award for writing *Unity (1918)* for Touchstone Theatre. But, even as the Electric Company continues to evolve and its work becomes more polished, it does so with its core collective values intact.

Boca del Lupo has a similar history, beginning as a six-person collective at Simon Fraser University in 1997. Its

original members included James Long and Maiko Bae Yamamoto, who have since broken off to form their own successful collective, Theatre Replacement. Sherry J. Yoon assumed the role of Boca’s *de facto* dramaturg/director when the group got together in the rehearsal room, each member improvisationally riffing on assigned research material. Boca’s mandate, as posted on their website, to create “new performance works using unique processes of collaboration and extraordinary interactions between performer and audience,” has been accomplished via their free, site-specific summer shows staged in and among the trees in Stanley Park and, more recently, under the Burrard Street Bridge, with the audience moving along with the action. James Fagan Tait, a Ryerson graduate who had studied with Lecoq in Paris, joined the collective as head writer to script *The Last Stand* (2002), *The Lagoon of Lost Tales* (2003), *Vasily the Luckless* (2005), *The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces* (2006) – all adapted from folk tales – and *Quasimodo* (2007), a version of Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*. Design concerns, especially Dodge’s interest in climbing and rigging, dictate the narrative structure of these spectacles as much as the scripts do.

The newworldtheatre collective was comprised of Camyar Chai, Marcus Youssef and Adrienne Wong until Chai left in 2007. Originally from Iran, Chai started newworld at UBC in 1993, initially staging allegorical Persian children’s plays. But, after seeing a Caravan Farm Theatre show, he decided to bring other

people’s ideas and experiences into the mix. Lois Anderson, Stephen Hill, James Fagan Tait and Chai collectively created the Brechtian *Devil Box Cabaret* (1998) and staged it in a Commercial Drive storefront. Each member of the collective took a scene and led a day’s work on it, with Chai functioning as “the distiller,” as he calls it, by putting it all together in the end.

After the success of *Devil Box*, newworld developed the concept of an annually rotating artistic directorship. Hill took the first turn and came up with *Leaky Heaven Circus*, a zany, family-oriented collaboration. It incorporated the skills of acrobatic performers like Colin Heath and Manon Beaudoin, who had worked with Cirque du Soleil, and took care of the



Marcus Youssef, Camyar Chai (and Camyar Chai) in the newworld theatre and Cahoots Theatre Projects production of *The Adventures of Ali and Ali and the aXes of Evil* at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre (February 2006)

Photo By Tim Matheson

problem of childcare by putting their kids into the show, along with a developmentally challenged young man and a dog, all of whom became Leaky Heaven regulars. This was a paradigm for the politics of newworld: what Chai calls “changing the model” to create “theatre that wants to be involved in social health.” Leaky Heaven Circus eventually became an independent company under Hill.

Chai says he “started to get dissatisfied with that kind of collective creation. The chaos was wonderful but it didn’t have room for finesse and subtlety. That’s when Marcus [Youssef] and I started to discuss *hybridizing*, how to maintain that chaos and energy and add what a script gives you, which is structure and control.” The first such hybrid show developed into the Persian-tinged *Asylum of the Universe* (2004), which incorporated a variety of physical theatre styles. Then came *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the aXes of Evil* (2004), newworld’s metatheatrical challenge to the post-9/11 world order and Canada’s role in it. The play was developed, along with Guillermo Verdecchia, from political skits Chai and Youssef had been doing for CBC radio about two Middle Eastern asylum seekers named Ali. A third actor – originally Tom Butler, then John Murphy – played a Scottish stage manager, and newworld eventually produced Murphy’s own terrific solo

diatribe against Catholicism, *The Heretic* (2006). Chai explains that it fit newworld’s diversity mandate perfectly: “a Scottish-Catholic upbringing is as completely ‘diverse’ as a Persian-Muslim upbringing.” The next newworld piece was *Adrift on the Nile* (2006), adapted by Youssef from an Egyptian novel by Naguib Mahfouz. Its colour-blind cast included actors Maiko Bae Yamamoto and Adrienne Wong playing Egyptians. Says Chai, who directed, “We want all our shows to look like what you’d see walking down the street in Vancouver.”

These three companies, along with Radix Theatre, another Vancouver collective that has been doing site-specific work since the 1980s, have given collective creation

in Canada a distinctive West Coast tilt in the twenty-first century. Original, adventurous and culturally diverse, their work has brought a younger, more heterogeneous audience into Vancouver’s theatres and re-energized the notion of theatrical collaboration for a new generation.

## Notes

- 1 Dates in parentheses indicate year of first production.
- 2 All artist quotations derive from conversations between the author and Kim Collier, Jonathon Young, Jay Dodge, and Camyar Chai.

## Works Cited

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Jerry Wasserman, Professor of English and Theatre at the University of British Columbia, has published widely on Canadian theatre. His books include *Modern Canadian Plays*, now in its 4th edition; *Theatre and AutoBiography: Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*, co-edited with Sherrill Grace; and *Spectacle of Empire: Marc Lescaobot’s Theatre of Neptune in New France*. Jerry is also an actor with more than 200 professional credits for stage and screen and theatre critic for *The Province* newspaper in Vancouver.

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