

EMPOWERING COMMUNITY DIALOGUE THROUGH

ORAL HISTORY PERFORMANCE PANEL - MISCELLANEOUS Productions

DVD #1 – photo collage of *Stock Characters: The Cooking Show*

First of all, I would like to thank OHMAR for featuring the work of MISCELLANEOUS Productions in this exciting conference, and the Canada Council for the Arts –Inter-Arts Program for the Travel Grant that enabled me to be here!

MISCELLANEOUS Productions is a non-profit, charitable society that collaborates with diverse at-risk and high risk/experiential community members and merges high art, community development and popular culture to create and present issue-based works of art. We are based in East Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada – an inner-city community which is facing extreme challenges including issues of poverty, homelessness, addictions and the sharp shift of attention and funding to the upcoming elitist two-week party that is the Vancouver 2010 Olympics. The Government of Canada has contributed \$20 million to the Vancouver Olympics for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies and yet, nothing to housing or services. Homelessness is the biggest issue facing the city. Vancouver is a community under siege by three right-wing levels of government, an avaricious private sector and crumbling infrastructure.

East Van includes the two poorest urban postal codes in the country, the largest urban Aboriginal population in Canada and the infamous Downtown Eastside where one in three residents is HIV positive and the rate of hepatitis C is 70%. Along with most of our professional Artistic Team, I live and work in East Van. We are all emotionally and politically connected to the community, and have a commitment to making art that is relevant and accessible.

DVD #2 – possible DVD *What You Carry With You...*

MISCELLANEOUS Productions has also collaborated with the youth and elders in the community of Richmond, British Columbia, a mixed socio-economic suburb of Vancouver that boasts the most culturally diverse population in Canada. People from throughout the Asian diaspora make up more than 65% of the population. Farms border gated communities that surround the downtown area of Richmond, a city of malls and walls. Directly to the north of this small city is the Vancouver International Airport. What you are watching is a very low budget DVD of the documentation from *What You Carry With You...*

After six years of work in this commuter city, we discovered that the powerful live in denial of their community's most pressing concerns: gangs, street racing, addiction, a growing population of homeless people, inter-racial tension that often erupts into violence and bored, disaffected, under-served youth.

And into these two communities we have brought in teams of professional artists, educators, social workers, community developers and technicians to collaborate on live performances, videos, public art and media campaigns with integrated groups of culturally diverse, at-risk, high risk, marginalized, low-income youth to create original, issue-based works of art.

We have also produced a major youth and elder performance project and have a strong history of using interdisciplinary, oral history performance to confront issues of violence and racism. We work mostly in English but have employed more than 15 other languages and dialects in our performance work.

END -- DVD #2 – *What You Carry With You...*

The DVD that I screened to open my presentation was a photo-collage of rehearsals and performances of *Stock Characters: The Cooking Show*, our most recently completed performance project presented at the Vancouver East Cultural Centre in November 2007. *Stock Characters* is a campy *Iron Chef* political satire set in East Vancouver - but it's an apocalyptic East Van of the future. Using the framework of "a hardcore cooking contest at the end of the world," I worked with a cast of young people ages 15 to 26 and an awesome professional team to take a raw, honest look at the challenges facing youth in the community: poverty, racism, stereotyping, gang violence, addiction, abuse. A feature-length documentary film of the process of making this work is currently being edited.

This satire of the Japanese television cooking show featured diverse young (moved) East Van participants as wacky adaptations of the *Iron Chef* characters. Writing a strong plot drawn from oral histories of the youth actors and other youth and their supporters in the community, the performers cooked up their stories (instead of food) onstage, using metaphors of cooking in an atmosphere of fierce yet campy competition. Much of the performance focused on a selection of dishes which were presented as a series of short narratives.

Prepared and served up by the young chef-performers with celebrity youth judges tasting and sampling them, the contending stories served as the structure and built suspense in the performance. We featured East Vancouver youth considered to be “at the end of the line” by school administrators, social workers and the criminal justice system, or youth that had been severely bullied, and youth that fell into both categories when they first entered our program in October 2006.

Stock Characters explored themes of consumption, poverty, addiction, stereotyping, racism and violence at the end of a world without food, integrity, empathy or compassion.

We have been working with and making performances about culturally diverse at-risk and high risk/experiential youth, including those who come from organized crime and street-involved backgrounds since July 2000.

I feel it is important to state that most often youth who participate in our projects tend to have multiple barriers and challenges - it's never just one issue that they are facing. We have worked with and represented the issues of youth aged 13 – 27 years old who are dealing with the following risk factors:

- ◆ First and second generation immigrants and refugees to Canada
- ◆ Youth from communities of colour
- ◆ Indigenous youth
- ◆ Secondary school students
- ◆ Youth currently not in school
- ◆ At-risk youth and High risk/experiential youth
- ◆ Un- and under-employed and working youth
- ◆ Low-income youth
- ◆ Street-involved, formerly street-involved youth and youth living without a fixed address
- ◆ Youth in-care / foster children
- ◆ Youth who are survivors of wars and violent, oppressive regimes and/or have parents who are survivors of wars and violent, oppressive regimes
- ◆ Young people involved in social service agencies and youth groups
- ◆ Young people involved in the illegal drug sub-culture as users, dealers and “drug mules” and/or young people struggling with substance abuse
- ◆ Youth attracted to or affiliated with gangs and/or those trying to exit gangs
- ◆ Youth at-risk for gang violence
- ◆ Youth involved with the criminal justice system
- ◆ Youth who have been physically and sexually abused
- ◆ Sexually-exploited youth
- ◆ Youth dealing with mental health issues and/or youth who have parents with mental illness
- ◆ Youth who have mental health issues that have been misdiagnosed
- ◆ Youth being forced into arranged marriages
- ◆ Youth who have adults in their lives struggling with substance abuse, poverty, racism and violence
- ◆ Youth struggling with family distress
- ◆ Youth with learning and developmental disabilities
- ◆ LGBT, questioning and Intersex youth
- ◆ “Outsider” youth.

We also produced *MISCELLANEOUS Magazine* in 2004, (*hold up MISCELLANEOUS Magazine*) a single issue publication exploring our process. Please check out our web site at < www.miscellaneous-inc.org > where *MISCELLANEOUS Magazine* is available for free downloading.

DVD #2 – *e-race* photo collage

Our 2005 performance and 2006 video/DVD adaptation project, *e-race*, was a collaboration with youth in the community aged 15 – 27 years old. *e-race* explores diverse young people's obsession with speed including street racing, drinking / drugging and driving, crystal meth, gangs and early sexual activity.

e-race examines the glorification and romanticization of speed as well as the erasure of race that many youth feel when cases of speed are discussed in the mass media. Extensive oral histories were collected from the youth participants and others in the community, and we are grateful to have been able to produce a low-budget video adaptation.

What you just saw on the screen were photographic images from the live performance. Now I will screen a short demo DVD of the adaptation of the performance. Please note a WARNING: COARSE LANGUAGE, SCENES OF VIOLENCE, NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN 12 AND UNDER, MAY OFFEND SOME ADULTS.

DVD #3 – e-race demo

MISCELLANEOUS Productions is considered to be one of the most diverse arts organizations in Canada, uniting professional artists and non-professionals of various cultural backgrounds and ages who find their roots on six continents. Our founders, Board, professional staff and community participants include GBLT people, first and second generation immigrants, people of colour, Indigenous people and people with disabilities who create challenging, socially relevant performances, video, music and publications.

Our process of creating, writing and producing issue-based works takes from two to five years from development to production per project. All youth participants are given full credit for co-writing the performances, acting, singing, dancing and working on various technical aspects of the performances, and are paid upon completion of the projects. Some youth who were performers/co-writers on our first two performances have also worked in various capacities as interning professionals with MISCELLANEOUS Productions as composers and writers contributing to our publication. Hiring youth from previous projects onto our professional team is among the various ways we work to empower the community.

We collaborate with youth participants to create the characters in our performances and videos, and write the scripts together based on oral histories designed to feature the stories of the youth involved in performing and stories of young people in the larger community who have come forward to share.

All of the youth we deal with are at-risk or high risk/experiential, some feel isolated, some are involved in criminal activity, some are victims, some are perpetrators of violence and racism, and some are all of the above.

This is how we use oral histories in our work: we usually respond to an issue in the community brought to us by youth, youth workers, social workers, psychologists working with youth, community health workers, etc.

The only exception was our first project, named after Reena Virk, the 14-year old South Asian girl who was viciously murdered by six girls and one boy near Victoria, British Columbia in November 1997. This was my idea and grew out of my horrified reaction to this act of girls perpetrating violence against another girl. There were so many cases like that of Reena's happening in British Columbia at the time - perhaps not as ultimately violent, but vicious nevertheless. As a feminist and an out queer, I wanted to work directly with youth in an artistic forum to explore the reasons for this brutality, and along with a group of artists and community activists, we founded the organization to realize the project.

We then spend more than a full year collecting oral histories from youth, elders, youth workers, doctors, nurses, librarians, social workers, youth workers, etc. - anyone supporting youth in the community. For instance, when we were developing *THE REENA PROJECT / Outcasts & Angels* in 2000, we collected oral histories from youth and adults about girls who perpetrated violence and bullying against other girls.

When we were doing outreach for the project at Spring Break in the Richmond Centre Mall, we witnessed and intervened when a white girl began fiercely beating a South Asian girl in the Food Court. A version of that incident was adapted and featured as a pivotal scene in our performance.

We collect oral histories both individually and in focus group sessions, or even in free theatre workshops - sometimes on video, sometimes we just write them out, etc. – it is dependent upon the person being interviewed whether they want to be public or anonymous.

Then after this research, we do formal auditions and interviews of youth who want to participate as actors, musicians, technicians, etc. After we cast, there is a very elaborate process of training, exercises, improvising and rehearsing beginning with the oral histories of the cast members and those collected in the community. Sometimes individuals from the focus groups and workshops end up in the cast.

After the improvising of the story, combining one oral history with another or one element of one oral history with two elements from another and three from a third – turning it into something very theatrical - I often ask the youth to email or write me out the text, and then I polish it up, etc. and put it into a script format. I usually ask the youth who has the most comfort writing it out to do this task. Some youth love writing, others are made literally sick at the thought of having to write.

We never expect a youth who has an aversion to writing to pen a scene and often those who don't like writing are good improvisers. We work with Eric D. Wong, who is a brilliant Diversity Consultant, and we also do a complex series of workshops with him at the beginning phases including exercises like the Cultural Bag, and the results of these exercises always find their way into the script. Our Social Worker, the incredible Esther Oh, works closely with the youth individually and attends some rehearsals as I push them to go deeper. We have two Assistant Directors, Azin Sadr and Sarah Sawatsky, professional actors who act as role models and give additional support.

We work to keep them safe and ensure that they are ready to disclose some of their very personal oral histories. This is a simplification, an outline, of our intricate two-year process at MISCELLANEOUS Productions.

The most recently completed performance project, *Stock Characters: The Cooking Show*, was a little bit different because the youth are extremely challenged on all levels and severely multi-barriered. Most had problems both improvising **and** writing.

Suffice to say that they collaborated with me to write the realistic sections of the play – all based on their own oral histories or those collected from youth writers/participants who could not make it through the program (mostly youth who had severe addictions issues), as well as youth workers, an inner-city doctor who works with our youth population - and I wrote all the stylized, satirical scenes. One of the scenes was based on oral histories of two Squamish people, Cease Wyss, an adult and Dustin Rivers, a youth of 18 years old who were experts on the oral histories of the Coast Salish people. The Squamish, the Musqueam and the Tslay-wah-tulth are Indigenous people who make their home on the unceded territory that is now called Vancouver.

So, it is a very complex but fascinating process that all ends up with me, and my more than 30 years of professional experience and training in theatre, interdisciplinary performance art and film-making, putting it into a theatrical script. Then I collaborate with a team of professional artists and technicians to create the other components, hip hop and World music for example.

These are usually some form of Japanese Taiko or South Asian frame drumming, costumes, sets, various styles of dance, video projections, animations and final documentary, etc. I have collaborated with some of these artists for years and they really understand our multi-year process deeply.

We also conduct a series of Open Rehearsals, and diverse people from the community attend and give feedback. We present the work at a very raw phase and ask the audience for input through a Feedback Session after the performance. Audiences are made up of youth, community activists, social workers, health workers, mental health workers, multicultural youth workers, queer activists, educators, funders and professional artists. The feedback from these audience members is fed directly into the script.

Our task is not only to present oral history performance, educate, raise awareness and change the attitudes of our participants and young audience, but also to open the minds of the adult status quo. The goal is always to use art as a tool for social change and to build a community where there was not one before.

By having experiential youth from the community play characters they have created with our professional team and based on their own oral histories as well as oral histories from other youth and their supporters in the community, we seek to empower the community – including the performers, technicians and audience.

Through our Feedback Sessions after Open Rehearsals and performances, we work to encourage an analysis of oral history performance and promote dialogue about the issues we are facing collectively. Through the distribution and screenings of our videos – adaptations and documentaries - we hope to create productions that endure and explore our complex, challenging and rewarding multi-year process of community engagement, innovation and presentation.