





Courting Audiences
across the Neighbourhood Divide:

BRUCE — The Musical
in the Downtown Eastside

by *Sarah Banting*

"It's too bad," mused the man behind me to his companion at intermission. "The music is so good and the show is so well put together, but the topic is so regional. I mean, who is the audience for this?" "Well," she replied hesitantly, looking around at the crowd. "I think it was sold out every night..."

It was November 16, 2008: the closing-night performance of *Bruce-The Musical*, an original play dramatizing the life of the late Bruce Eriksen, a Vancouver activist and long-time city councillor who founded the Downtown Eastside Residents' Association (DERA) in the 1970s. A packed house was milling amiably in what little standing room was left in the aisles of East Vancouver's Russian Hall auditorium. Ranks of extra seats had been brought in at the last minute for closing night.

I looked curiously at the man I had overheard speaking, wondering if his clothing or his carriage would mark him as an outsider to the Eastside. His question—"Who is the audience for this?"—seemed to ignore the people filling the hall. And it implied, I thought, a presumption about the class of audiences suited to attend high-quality theatre, an idea that excellent music and polished stage performance are best enjoyed by people with means. In his estimation, *Bruce* was unlikely to reach such audiences because its concerns were local to a specific community: impoverished residents of the Downtown Eastside.

The man looked as casually dressed and at home as the people around him, of course. It only occurred to me afterward that my interest

in discovering him a misfit amidst that buoyantly chattering crowd reflected my own anxiousness to fit in there. I live in tony, middle-class Kitsilano, a long bus ride across town from the Russian Hall. I feel a little awkward about where I live when I visit places that prompt me to consider my relative privilege. (Such silly guilt helps no-one, I know.) I wanted to see the man standing sorely and snobbishly apart from the crowd so that I could see myself standing comfortably within it.

Just before that intermission, Steve Maddock, playing Bruce Eriksen, had delivered a confessional song about the toll Eastside activism takes on someone who cares. "These streets are full of sorrow," Bruce sang, "and it can make you sad." The houselights had just come up when I heard the man speak behind me. I was still under the spell of the song.

And if you went where I go
And if you saw what I see
Yes and if you did what I do
You'd need some healing too

Bruce's chorus had evolved over the course of the song, as he took heart at how even suffering residents of his neighbourhood find courage to help one another through difficulties. He had closed Act One of the musical by concluding, "And if you did what I do/You'd find some healing too."

Listening to Bruce sing, I admired those struggling for the rights of the underprivileged. I also felt my jealous little wish to belong among them—to deserve inclusion in the solidarity being enacted in the Russian Hall auditorium. When

members of the audience cheered, or laughed, or sighed empathetically along with the characters onstage, they claimed membership in the play's target community of concerned locals. Onstage, Bruce instructed a young Jean Swanson not to assume that the old men she was serving in the beer parlours were hopeless drunks: "You know, Jean, I'll bet we probably got fewer alcoholics here than in [wealthy] Shaughnessy. Only difference is, ours are more visible. They don't have nice living rooms to pass out in." People laughed in delight at this idea. They laughed again when one character—an audience favourite played by Jason Logan—jeered at a city alderman character who was speaking against Bruce's plea for a Downtown Eastside community centre. "Go back to Dunbar!" (Dunbar is a Westside neighbourhood, close to Kitsilano.)

Class lines were drawn, onstage, between those who were sympathetic to the local cause and those who were not, and those lines coincided with neighbourhood borders. When audiences laughed, they demonstrated their comfortable position on the sympathetic side of those lines. Doing so, they were finding some healing, perhaps, for the hurts of marginalization, taking heart at the spectacle of their neighbourhood hero's life onstage. I was living vicariously through their sentiments, having crossed the city to join them in the audience. I did not want to live in the poverty the characters were describing. I was admittedly pretty happy in Kitsilano. But there in the Russian Hall, I wanted to feel myself a part of the community convened by the play.

In a city like Vancouver, neighbourhood boundaries are popularly understood to demarcate class divides and, by extension, different arts communities. To Bob Sarti, who wrote *Bruce*, and Jay Hamburger, who directed it, Eastside Vancouver theatre audiences are different from Westside ones. Residents of the Downtown Eastside in particular are not what Sarti calls "theatre-going audiences." Those audiences live on Vancouver's wealthier Westside. Hamburger observes that many members of *Bruce's* audience were people who "hardly have any money," who were seeing theatre for perhaps the first time in their lives. They were not theatre patrons, precisely, not having the means to buy subscriptions or sustain a season of productions with consistent attendance. Both Sarti and Hamburger acknowledge a long history of inventive theatre- and arts-based community activism in the Downtown Eastside.¹ And Theatre in the Raw, the company producing *Bruce*, has

Courting audiences

always sought to make its own productions affordable for neighbourhood residents—so that they too might become theatre-goers, so to speak—as well as offering them the chance to participate in developing and performing plays that reflect their community's concerns. The outspoken man behind me in the intermission crowd meant to say, perhaps, that from an economic perspective, poor people do not count as an audience. But, as his companion seemed to understand, they counted decidedly as an assembly of people appreciative of *Bruce* and its concerns.

Indeed, Downtown Eastside residents were the primary target audience of *Bruce*. Sarti has said that his conscious priority for the play was "to write for the people of the neighbourhood, to see them recognized for themselves onstage" (Interview). And Theatre in the Raw noted in the house program that the play's primary intention was to "equip current residents [of the neighbourhood] with an understanding of how their community came to be what it is." The not-for-profit company did its best to make the play accessible even to poor Eastside residents, giving away as many free tickets as it could afford, and channelling the free tickets through local community centres. And *Bruce's* jokes and local references spoke with special directness to the Eastside community. After the curtain fell at the close of the final act, I overheard amid the happy buzz one audience member talking excitedly about how he had recognized his own home named onstage. The play ended with a song about Bruce Eriksen Place, the social housing apartment building now standing at the corner of Main and Hastings streets. Its exterior walls are engraved with words that the song had turned into a stirring incantation: Voice. Vision. Home. Respect. "...I live in that building," the man said to his companions with evident pride. "And on my balcony it says, Respect!"

Addressing itself first to a neighbourhood audience, *Bruce* was a political event in the spirit (if not precisely the method) of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. By putting the Downtown Eastside onstage and inviting the Russian Hall assembly to enjoy and participate in the performance, the play publicly claimed the legitimacy of both the neighbourhood's concerns and its theatre audiences. And by offering local residents in the audience a chance to recognize their own social and geographical position as the one privileged by this play and its inside jokes, the play echoed Eriksen's own historical efforts to reframe

Class lines were drawn, onstage, between those who were sympathetic to the local cause and those who were not, and those lines coincided with neighbourhood borders.



the neighbourhood as an important centre of community and culture in its own right.

Onstage, Bruce struggled to make even those people who lived and worked in the area to recognize it as a place worthy of respect: "I thought it was the Skids," Jean said, when Bruce and Libby reintroduced her to her familiar place of work, framing it for the first time as a neighbourhood. "You heard of the West End? ...of Shaughnessy?" they asked. "Of course," she replied. "Well," Bruce claimed, proudly, "now you're hearing of the Downtown Eastside." *Bruce* took a similar pride in reminding its Eastside audiences of Bruce's historic successes. Reflecting on its warm local reception and overflow Eastside audiences, Hamburger admits to feeling that *Bruce* succeeded in rekindling a certain sense of community and political possibility for a core of people already invested in the neighbourhood. I believe him: I had absorbed some of the radiant warmth of their newfound fire in the Russian Hall auditorium.


But Sarti and Hamburger had hoped for audiences from across the city for *Bruce*, as well as neighbourhood audiences. Sarti and Hamburger explain that they wanted to include the Westside, partly because they hoped the wider civic community would come to appreciate the play's vision of the Eastside as a "great little neighbourhood"—and thus come to feel, and want to share in, the very warmth I am writing about (Interviews). Partly, too, Theatre in the Raw needed an audience with means. Especially during a time when government funding for the arts is being cut, a ticket-buying audience is often a welcome one.

Always reserving its most direct address for the Eastside community, *Bruce* sought to bring a neighbourly mixture of audiences together in the Russian Hall. Theatre in the Raw hired professional actors and musicians to carry the lively score's tune. According to even my skeptical intermission commentator, the resulting music, composed by Bill Sample and Earle Peach, was "so good" as to broadly appeal. And neither the script nor the play's publicity was designed to speak exclusively to the Eastside. Bob Sarti's storytelling style is thoroughgoing and explanatory, perhaps owing to his former work as a *Vancouver Sun* journalist. As a result, *Bruce* spoke inclusively even to people in the audience who lacked really local knowledge. A character named the Reporter narrated the play, offering generous amounts of background information. "Hello folks, welcome to the Downtown Eastside," beamed Mikal Grant, playing the Reporter, as the musical opened. "It's a great little neighbourhood. The proverbial million stories. I've reported on a few of them myself." The Reporter's warm embrace and the cast's heart-stringing enthusiasm offered to make anyone feel welcome.

In an effort to draw people from across the city, Theatre in the Raw purchased ad space in the widely circulated free weekly newspapers *Georgia Straight* and *Vancouver Courier*. They applied to Vancouver's Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA), hoping to be granted free advertising space through the city's Transit Shelter Advertising Program for not-for-profit organizations. The company that provides the program's ad space ostensibly places ads at random in bus shelters across the city. Theatre in the Raw was delighted to be granted advertising space on ten bus shelters. According to Hamburger, this gained them otherwise unaffordable exposure. But they were disappointed to realize that, by some accident, the shelters assigned for *Bruce* ads were all confined to the Eastside—despite the fact that the OCA's stated aim is to make the widest possible Vancouver population aware of the cultural events being advertised. None of their ads made it west of Main Street.

Sarti and Theatre in the Raw wanted to include the Westside for directly political reasons too. With the Canadian federal election and the highly publicized American presidential election just recently concluded, a provincial election on the horizon, and a municipal election just over a week away, *Bruce* opened during an unusually spirited season of political campaigning. Theatre in the Raw hoped to draw the politicians running for mayor and city council to the play, thus highlighting the Downtown Eastside as a constituency worth courting and briefing the campaigners on the neighbourhood's history and human face. They hoped for a show of support from the civic politicians representing those parties whose support is strongest in the wealthier, Westside Vancouver neighbourhoods—especially the Non-Partisan Association (NPA), whose principles include private property rights and freedom of private enterprise.

Seeking to bring the NPA to the Russian Hall, Theatre in the Raw was echoing Eriksen's example once again. The play showed Bruce arranging to have a city council committee hold a meeting in the Carnegie building at Main and Hastings when deciding whether the building should become a Downtown Eastside community centre. Bringing resistant aldermen from Dunbar to the Eastside was a strategic move. "It's always better to get them on your turf," Bruce explained to Marty. "It's easier to convince them then." Hoping to attract civic politicians and politically minded Vancouver citizens to Downtown Eastside turf, Sarti visited a number of mayoralty candidate meetings across the city, handing out promotional fliers for the play, in the weeks leading up to the opening. "Vote for Bruce! He's the People's Choice!" the fliers said. While the fliers went on to make it clear that *Bruce—The Musical* was a play, they framed the



across
the
neighbour-
hood
divide

play as participating in contemporary political events. "Yes, Bruce Eriksen is back...singing and dancing his way into this election campaign," they proclaimed.

In Sarti and Hamburger's estimation, *Bruce* did not get the Westside audiences it hoped for. There were Westsiders among the Russian Hall crowds; my own companion and I were not the only people who crossed town to see the Downtown Eastside alive in lights onstage. But we were too few. Perhaps a well-known and well-equipped performance space and being part of an established theatre's advertised season could have helped Theatre in the Raw attract "theatre-going" audiences. But the cost of a centrally located and widely respected venue was prohibitive. The Russian Hall was a deliberately strategic choice—its location on Downtown Eastside "turf" made it accessible to the neighbourhood audiences who were Theatre in the Raw's first priority. Moreover, its antiquated lighting system and gymnasium floor were affordable and its size could accommodate the crowds that did flock to see *Bruce*. Although mixed audiences are not unheard-of at performances in the Russian Hall, its location, just off East Hastings Street in residential Downtown Eastside, may nevertheless have been a barrier for Westside flocks.

The municipal election took place on the date of the show's penultimate performance, and on the nights preceding it, political parties and advocacy groups did establish a presence in the Russian Hall. But, predictably, those who attended and made a show of support for the play were the more left-leaning politicians, from parties already invested in and supported by Eastside voters. NDP MP Libby Davies addressed the opening night audience, and several of the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) candidates for public office sat in the front row the same night, standing up at Hamburger's request to acknowledge and be acknowledged by the Russian Hall crowd. Their attendance was fitting and appreciated: Eriksen was once a COPE city councillor. COPE's municipal platform promised homes, transit, and neighbourhoods—for everyone.

But a more mixed gathering would not only have enabled crosstown audiences to see the Downtown Eastside's concerns appealingly staged; it would also have allowed the Eastside audience to enact their solidarity and demonstrate their rekindled community spirit for their fellow citizens and civic representatives from across town. To Hamburger's knowledge, and to his disappointment, none of the NPA candidates attended the play.

For theatre companies hoping that their productions will appeal across neighbourhood boundaries, the fact that these boundaries are compounded by class divides, political polarities, and diverging local investments can prove an obstacle. Or perhaps it is especially the popular perception of this compounding as fact that is the problem. The man behind me at intermission thought *Bruce's* content was too "regional" for broad appeal. This was meant, I think, to be a polite way of saying that the play was too bound to a specific geographical position—and thus too bound to a specific, and marginal, socio-political perspective—to be really successful as theatre. I think he was wrong in several respects.

For one thing, our urban neighbourhoods are already more socially mixed than his statement recognizes: the Downtown Eastside may still be Canada's poorest neighbourhood, but expensive new condominiums are rapidly being built there—a development that does nothing to reduce poverty but does change the area's composition. There are homeless people struggling for survival in my Westside neighbourhood too. (And as Bruce said onstage, there are drunks everywhere—in Shaughnessy as well as on the Eastside.)

And many people's sympathies are not exclusively local. One Westside audience member at *Bruce* was Mel Lehan, a Kitsilano resident who would run as an NDP candidate in the May 2009 provincial election. Lehan was "so impressed" with the play's message and the quality of its music and performances that he felt "it should be seen in venues all across the city and not just in the Downtown Eastside." Bringing performances across town had worked before. Earlier in 2008, Lehan had successfully helped to bring a Downtown Eastside-based theatre project about homelessness—the opera *Condemned*—to Kitsilano, where it received standing ovations and three sold-out performances. *Condemned* featured amateur performers, many of whom had themselves experienced homelessness. Unfortunately, the substantial cost of remounting *Bruce*, with its professional actors and musicians, has so far prevented a crosstown tour.

On the other hand, *Bruce's* concerns were precisely "regional," but in a wider sense than the man behind me intended. So long as diverse urban communities across the Vancouver landscape continue to share city resources and be governed by a common city council, their lives are intertwined. As the Downtown Eastside gentrifies, its poorest residents are pressed to move elsewhere in the city. And while the idea of expanding audiences for a play like *Bruce* by exporting it to other neighbourhoods promises to reintroduce the Eastside to people who might otherwise avoid it, I think that Theatre in the Raw's original attempt to welcome a mixed audience to the Russian Hall offered more potential to engage Vancouverites from across the city in the Downtown Eastside. To the extent that *Bruce* succeeded in making outsiders like me yearn to find a home in the community convened by the play, it offered a vision of Vancouver that placed the Downtown Eastside not at the city's margins but at its centre (or, to borrow from the Eastside's Heart of the City arts festival, at its "heart"). If only it were easier to get audiences to cross town.

The author would like to extend sincere thanks to Jay Hamburger, Bob Sarti, and Heidi Taylor for their generous help with the writing of this article, to Mel Lehan, and to the cast and company at Theatre in the Raw for their wonderful productions.



© Sindy Angel / Anna Kuman, Steve Maddock and Kuei-ming Lin

NOTE

¹ Hamburger cites Vancouver Moving Theatre and Headlines Theatre as companies that engage local residents and issues in their Downtown Eastside-based productions. *Bruce* closely followed the fifth annual Heart of the City Festival, a collection of eighty cultural events produced over twelve days in venues across the Downtown Eastside. Vancouver playwright and dramaturge Heidi Taylor reminds me, as well, that the critically acclaimed theatre- and circus-based company Leaky Heaven Circus has been in residence at the Russian Hall for a number of years. Their productions have frequently involved children and adults from the surrounding neighbourhood.

WORKS CITED

- Hamburger, Jay. Personal interview. 10 December 2008 and 13 March 2009.
 Lehan, Mel. Telephone interview. 7 August 2009.
 Sarti, Bob. "*Bruce—The Musical*." Unpublished playscript. Final draft, 24 September 2007.
 ———. Telephone interview. 21 December 2008.
 Taylor, Heidi. Personal interview. 19 January 2009.
 Theatre in the Raw. *Bruce—The Musical*. House program. n.d.

BIO

Sarah Banting IS A DOCTORAL CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, WHERE SHE IS CURRENTLY WRITING A DISSERTATION ENTITLED "COMMON GROUND AND THE CITY: ASSUMED COMMUNITY IN VANCOUVER FICTION AND THEATRE." ATTENDING PLAYS IN A WIDE VARIETY OF VENUES ACROSS THE CITY HAS TAUGHT HER ABOUT THE COMPLICATED WAYS IN WHICH THE GEOGRAPHIES OF PERFORMANCE AFFECT THE AUDIENCES WHO ATTEND, AND ARE ADDRESSED BY, THE THEATRE.