

THEATRE IN THE RAW: *Grassroots Theatre*

BY GAIL NYOKA

Dedicated to grassroots theatre is a line from the mandate of Theatre In The Raw. 15 years into its life, the company, which started out in East Vancouver's La Quena café, stays close to its roots even as it shifts towards a more professional approach to its productions.

Founder and Artistic Director Jay Hamburger describes Theatre In The Raw as a semi-professional company, hiring professionals, while at the same time giving an opportunity to those with lesser experience to work with professionals and to gain skills and confidence. Hamburger lists the names of several actors and personnel who have gone on to successful careers within the theatre world. "We're dead-on in terms of picking talent," says Hamburger, speaking of plays chosen for production by the company.

Playwrights Guild of Canada president Hope McIntyre had one of her early works, *Trauma*, produced by Theatre In The Raw in 2001. It was the first of her plays produced by a company other than her own, and it later went on to two productions in Australia.

Theatre In The Raw also produces remounts of plays such as Wendy Lil's *Glace Bay Miners' Museum*, and classics such as Chekov's *Uncle Vanya*, or works by internationally known playwrights like Caryl Churchill. But its focus is predominantly on new Canadian works. "We're one of the few companies willing to take a chance on daring pieces," says Hamburger, who is now working on a couple of new pieces. One is a play that deals with police oppression and another, on the difficulties of violence faced by South Asian women. Hamburger says he likes to take on difficult subjects—addiction, sexual abuse, residential schools. He talks of the eager response to the play *Medicine*, by LaVerne Adams, which was staged in a former residential school. "People stormed the box office," says Hamburger. "At the end of the show, everyone was in tears. The actors were weeping."

Hamburger is pleased with the response to another show: *Bruce - The Musical*, the company's last mainstage show. It tells the story of Bruce Eriksen, a former alcoholic turned ironworker then politician and civic disturber, who was instrumental in transforming Vancouver's lowest income neighbourhood from Skid Road into a residential community. "It's a real Canadian story," says Hamburger, who is enthusiastic when speaking of the show's popularity and the attention it has garnered. Hamburger worked with playwright Bob Sarti for three and a half years before mounting the production. "When I have a piece of work that is good, I'll stick with it," he says. Over the years Theatre In The Raw has had a strong history of play development.

His preferred method for choosing productions for the company is through the bi-annual playwriting competition. To date, 14 of the theatre's productions have been entries from the contest. As an international competition, it has seen entries from countries as far-flung as India, Israel and Korea. "I'm pleased with that," says Hamburger, who says he is always open to something new. Although it takes some time, he responds to and comments on all plays received.

In choosing work for production, he looks for originality and work with rich imagery and content. "I love taking a chance on work that is gritty," he says. He likes to encourage work from within the Vancouver community and is seeking work from First Nations writers.

An upcoming project is *Mythical Voices for Our Time*, one-act plays inspired by the mythology of the culture of the writers. The Theatre In The Raw Season incorporates a series of one-act plays and one mainstage show, along with original radio work.

There's another line from the mission statement: *to give exposure to voices seldom heard*. In doing so Hamburger says there's something "spiritually uplifting sometimes with a performance. Something positive has happened, and you've been entertained as well."

Gail Nyoka is a playwright and novelist, specializing in work for young people.



Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett - 1998
L to R: David Stephens, Donald Alfred Morin & Paul Beckett. Photo by Nick Procaulo



Jessica's Will by Kent R. Brown, 2004
L to R: Michelle T. Baynton, Eroca Zales & Linda Rae. Photo by Gary Shilling



The Street by W. Ruth Kozak, 2000.
L to R: Patrick Maloughney, Poppy Reiner, Todd McGillivray & Stephen Gillis.
Photo by Keith Thirkell