

Savannah Walling

Running for Life

I left behind family, friends and my native home, blown north by the winds of fate, centuries of migration, and the Vietnam War, I lighted on a certain place in Canada and laid myself down on that place to work and live. Today I stand planted in Vancouver, Canada, with silvering hair, age fifty-five, professional artist, home-schooling mama, on the far side of menopause, my feet on mother earth. Most of my peers have long left the performing arts - only a few of us old timers left.

Today, I direct, write, perform, keen, drum, pace and fidget, and remember. All the years of training, performing, creating, travelling, circumnavigating east and west, up and down and under. Inhaling rich cultural aromas steaming out of twentieth century North America's boiling stew of global influences, spinning together east-west, innovation, tradition, high art and popular entertainment. Irresistibly compelled to integrate intoxicating blends of live performing arts spiced with stilts, masks, drums, clown, fire and shadows. Stirring these brews together with experimental dance and theatre to boil up "pure theatre of colour, vision, sound and movement" - fantastic fairy tales and urban parables that journey through enchanted landscapes of the imagination, anarchic byways of farce and the shadow world of dreams.

Today my mongrel roots are proudly planted on the seed bed of the world's ancient oral theatre traditions, where the performer is a dancer, an actor, a musician - able to handle props, costumes and instruments with ease and grace.

PHYSICAL JOURNEYS

I remember journeys crossing oceans and continents and neighbourhoods by aeroplanes, boats, buses, trains, trucks, cars, on foot. Broiling open air performances, preparing for forty below under the northern lights, shows for packed, entranced arenas, sparsely filled auditoriums, surging festival crowds, modest tiny theatres, big, gorgeous theatres, school gymnasiums, cathedral aisles, grassy parks, urban streets, filthy dressing rooms, palatial welcomes and food, no food and servant elevators, noisy chattering audiences

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(they loved it), silent reserved audiences (who also loved it), and the audiences who didn't love it. Washing costumes in laundromats, hotel wash basins, dirty ditches. Meeting unexpected hazards, wind storms, thunder storms, barking dogs, bureaucratic delays, bribes demanded, proselytising missionaries, paranoid spectators, slick sidewalks, sticky mud, bottle throwing drunks, burned out techies and unscrupulous bookers. Trying to remember where I am, warming up at 7 a.m., at 2 p.m., at 7 p.m., at 2 a.m. Breast feeding behind scenes and while directing technical rehearsals, negotiating with bookers, delivering lectures, looking for food at 2 a.m. Artists/audiences/collaborators/bookers you love and the ones you'll avoid forever - life on the road.

METAPHYSICAL JOURNEYS

I remember the inward journey of creating *Blood Music* - forty minutes of drum dancing inspired by very simple things: the rhythms of our hearts beating and pumping waves of blood, of our lungs breathing and the ebb and flow of the tides of the sea - life rhythms inspiring musical material and movement, organising dramatic content. When I work on this drum, I remember that its wood came from a tree that was alive, filled with the rhythms of breathing, drinking and growing. When I play this gong, I remember that its metal ore flowed through the veins of mother earth, liquid veins of molten metal flowing from her heart. When I blow this conch shell I remember that it was alive, living material slowly secreted by a creature from its own body to form a home. When we "dance" these instruments we remember life's wonderful gifts. When we perform *Blood Music*, we share music and dance inspired by very simple things - rhythms of life without which we would all die.

EVOLUTIONARY JOURNEYS

I remember the long evolutionary journey on which I first stepped twenty-five years ago: *Runners' Tale* - a rhythmic parable, hypnotic and physically challenging - an outpouring of morphing variations on the human run. So many versions - an unaccompanied solo, an eighteen member ensemble, training excerpts for workshops and lecture demonstrations, a compact duet. An Everyman and Everywoman are propelled by a chorus of drummers - goaded by driving, restless rhythms on big drums and gamelan. Journeying through an imaginary landscape of possibilities, the runners break through personal barriers of fatigue and self doubt, to arrive spent, but radiant, at the finishing line. For over twenty-five years, *Runners' Tale* has journeyed in all kinds of variations and all kind of situations - in theatres, gymnasiums, art galleries, community residencies and church. It is the story of my life.

I remember journeys into history that stimulated a long, complex creative marriage with my husband/ colleague Terry Hunter. We created *Drum Mother*, our archetypal character who dances and performs on drums built into her coloured skirt.

Terry and I created choreography, scenarios and *Drum Mother's* trickster alter ego *HeHeHe* (a red suited, red nosed clown). I directed and he performed. *Drum Mother* and *HeHeHe* have travelled around the world for hundreds of performances at big and small community events bringing people together in a spirit of celebration and hope.

JOURNEYS OF POLLINATION

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new creative seeds and new generations of creative plants in the fertile, rain forest soil. Here seeds proliferate or die, crowd native cultural plants, mutate into new forms and cross breed to form new artistic hybrids. Cross pollinating by random, idiosyncratic falls, gentle breezes, and torrential downpours, the roaring winds of cultural change uncover ancient art domains, reveal new combinations of ideas and stimulate new art forms.

Here, after twelve years of artistic collaboration in dance, mime and theatre, Terry and I give birth to Vancouver Moving Theatre, and develop a new form of interdisciplinary art influenced by Vancouver's Pacific Rim culture. Nine years later we gave birth to a son. Together we create, perform, administer the company and share in the raising of our son, Montana Blu. We are guided in our creative journey by rhythm. Collaborating with artists from a variety of disciplines and cultural traditions, we pose questions about life in the language of art.

SENDING DOWN ROOTS

Our home is Strathcona, Vancouver's oldest neighbourhood, planted next to a former native campsite. Entry point for rolling waves of immigrants, Strathcona is historically a cosmopolitan community of tremendous cultural diversity. Residents meet at corner stores and parks. The jumble of heritage and new multi-coloured buildings are squeezed onto narrow lots, flower gardens overflow onto sidewalks, apartment buildings, homes and stores exist side by side.

Home to hidden treasures from all over the world, Strathcona's vibrant cultural life simmers under the surface. When you dive deeply, you pull out artistic pearls: a master shakuhachi player, Vancouver's longest running folk orchestra, innovative new art forms, a literary festival and long forgotten vaudeville and Chinese Opera theatres. When we turn into cultural detectives, swimming underneath

the waters of everyday experience, we discover that Strathcona's fondness for spectacle, music and storytelling is far older than the last ten years, far older than the last one hundred years of immigration, and goes as far back as human memory.

For thousands of years, the Musqueam and Squamish nations hosted big social gatherings during the winter months, mounting elaborate weeks-long theatrical ceremonies, often for crowds of thousands. The hosts recounted their stories and history, outlined their relationship to land and community - celebrated with gift giving, feasting, lots of dramatic storytelling, startling special effects, dance choreography, songs, music, spectacular masks and costumes. Every important life event, from birth to death, from undoing a great wrong to honouring a great deed, was marked, witnessed and publicly celebrated.

With the discovery of gold on the Fraser River, life overturned. Gold-hungry, land-hungry immigrants invaded from Europe, Asia and the Americas - all of them bearing new creative seeds. For over a hundred years, the streets of Strathcona have rung with vaudeville, backyard Italian opera, Japanese shamisen, geisha songs and taiko drumming, Jewish synagogue songs, Ukrainian and Croatian orchestras, Cantonese opera, gypsy fiddles, police pipe bands, Afro-American choirs and jazz bands, First Nation pow wows, parades of all kinds, and a host of professional, amateur and student performers. Some of our traditional artists preserve the purity and standards of two-hundred-year-old traditions. Other artists adapt traditional forms to make them accessible for new ears and eyes. Some of our artists fuse Asian and Western aesthetics and traditions to create new art forms and original repertoire.

Our inner city location means that historically we face the kinds of problems that inner cities face all over the world - pressures from nearby prostitution and drug dealing contend

with the pressures from gentrification and development. Surviving years of protests and struggles to save the neighbourhood, Strathcona has emerged with a strong sense of identity and pride.

Strathcona is the home that gave birth to our son, to *Drum Mother* and to Vancouver Moving Theatre. Strathcona is the home that nourishes and anchors our outpouring creativity. So today we nourish our home with performances, residencies and workshops - events that express our love of Strathcona, our respect for its cultural treasures, and our pride in the art forms, cultural history, artists and residents of this remarkable community.

JOURNEYS OF DIFFICULTY

Over the years of my interdisciplinary journey, I sometimes hesitate, irresolute and uncertain, as disorienting mists swirl, obscuring my route. The road an interdisciplinary artist travels is cunningly beset with hidden pitfalls, artistic quicksand, crumbling support ground and relics dropped by pilgrims who have passed on the road before. This route has no short cuts for me. Until I began to locate our artistic ancestors and fellow pilgrims, this interdisciplinary journey felt like a lonely, solitary place.

In North America, artists wrestle with "soft" censorship imposed by governmental, marketing and corporate forces who decide which images, stories and ideas are relevant and will be supported to represent our culture - which artists will be encouraged to exist and which artists will be encouraged to die.

We can measure the strength of our visions by the intensity of the resistance they inspire. Yet how empowering it is to recognise resistance arising from entrenched assumptions like the one that expensive concert halls determine artistic worth, from conventions that popular entertainment and children's theatre are automatically second class fare for second class minds and from fear of

the human capacity to think and create in images as well as words.

As a research driven artist, I pay an ancient price. I am usually overworked and always poor. I fight old obstacles over and over again and face intermittent public censure and praise. I have lots of practice in picking myself up from innumerable falls. Cursed and blessed with the creative itch, I have learned to grow a tough skin and a humble heart. However, I have been blessed with family, friends and a fascinating profession, working with artists I respect in an economically stable country.

EMERGING INTO LIGHT

When, immersed in a fog of dark confusion and cloud, I halt - irresolute - I focus on one moment at a time, one step at a time on my journey. Waiting... waiting... until the creative sun rises again, visible in the mist, illuminating the road into the future with the light of the past.

The ground feels firm underneath my step - filling me with new strength... the courage to once again "endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and labour to gather the golden fleece of creative voice, accomplishment and survival.

I reach out to join hands with other pilgrims walking on this road... to create a circle of courage that helps us sift through, name and surmount, forces mounted to silence creative voices... to release ourselves from imposed labels.... to join together to preserve our culture's neglected memories... to write our own history... to help lighten the pain of existence, bringing grief, laughter, hope and understanding into light. The air fills with heavenly noises - rhythms of life... flowing through the creator... the drummer, dancer, actor... into me.



SAVANNAH WALLING (USA/Canada) was born in Oklahoma, USA, and has been active in the performing arts for over twenty years as a director, writer, choreographer, interdisciplinary performer, stilt dancer, musician, lecturer and teacher. She is the artistic director and co-founder of Vancouver Moving Theatre, now in its eighteenth season. She also co-directed *The Good Person of Setzuan*, awarded three Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards including Outstanding Production and Spectacle Design.

Terry Hunter and Savannah Walling in *Runners' Tale* Photo: David Cooper