In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community, Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to Song of This Place.

song of
This Place

BY JOY COGHILL

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FEBRUARY 18 - 28, 2004
Frederic Wood Theatre
PUPPET AND MASK MANIPULATION: INHABITING THE “SPACE BETWEEN”

by ROBERT MORE
Director

I vividly remember my introduction to puppet animation. At the time I was a young actor who had done quite a bit of work with neutral mask and clown, and this led to working with the brilliant Felix Mirbt on a production of Büchner’s Woyzeck. He called his wonderful puppet creations “animated masks” and was looking for actors who he felt would be responsive to the inner techniques of puppet manipulation. None of the actors had ever worked with puppets before and during the first few weeks we struggled mightily. Learning to support the puppets with an open, relaxed energy, learning the art of moving the mask from fixed point to fixed point in a way that had effortless flow, and learning to put the mask first, was an exhilarating but highly challenging process.

Puppet manipulation in this Bunraku style demands certain things. The animators or puppeteers are visible with nothing to hide their faces or bodies and yet they must appear invisible to the audience so that the mask and puppets can be dominant. The puppets are the characters; they must take the focus since their passions are the play. The manipulator must feel the emotions of the puppet characters without acting out these emotions him/herself. His/her face can reflect the action but he/she cannot release into the face or the eyes because if he/she does, he/she will draw focus from the puppet.

At first, this duality seemed impossible to solve. For many weeks, being a puppet manipulator felt like being required to be a “split personality”, a walking contradiction, a performance conundrum. However, by the time we opened Woyzeck, it started to make sense. Three years later, when we did Strindberg’s A Dream Play, again at the National Arts Center with Felix Mirbt, the intensive training had taken hold and we realized that the answer to this duality lies in finding the right state of mind and learning to inhabit the “space between”.

For the manipulator to function effectively, it is absolutely necessary that he/she becomes an “empathetic connector” whose primary job is to provide a steady link between actor and puppet, text and mask, the audience and the inner life of the play. When the manipulator learns to function as a creative conduit for his own inner creative impulse, and then allows this impulse, sparked by imagination and belief, to flow directly from the solar plexus (the abdominal brain) through the body, into the arms, through the fingertips, and into the mask, only then will the puppet become fully alive.

In Song of This Place, locating and sustaining this frame of mind, this essential state of being, is no easy task. In the first shows, such as Woyzeck, A Dream Play, and Brecht’s Happy End, the manipulators were silent since other actors supplied the voices of the puppets. The actions of the manipulators and the spoken word of “les voix” met in the puppet. This form was demanding enough, but in Song of This Place, the manipulator’s role has been stretched to the limit. In Song, the manipulator is also actor and singer and the puppet manipulation itself is far more complicated. The manipulator often provides the voice for the puppets him/herself and sometimes he/she is required to manipulate one puppet while at the same time providing the voice for another. In the fluid world of Song of This Place, the manipulator’s role is, by far, the most multi-dimensional, fluid, and taxing.

The manipulator’s primary job is first and foremost to get out of the way and become an open channel for creative energy. Any diminishment of this energy will result immediately in diminishing the life of the mask. Any tension, any doubt or judgement, hesitation or lack of clarity, will rob the puppet of life. In this sense, the puppet manipulator is truly an embodiment of Emily Carr’s own notion of the creative sensibility with its understanding that the first duty of the artist is to maintain clear pathways for the self so that the inner voice may be heard. The manipulator is the living representative of the “space between”. He/she is an open channel for thought and a puppet is thought manifested in his/her hands.

In Song of This Place, Joy Coghill has set out to capture the essence of the creative process itself. In order to do this, she has turned to the power of the mask, which through distilled gesture and the magic of evocation, allows us to “see” the inner life of the character in a way that can be startling and is often deeply moving. Capturing this inner life, the “soul stuff”, is the dream of Frieda in the play, as it was Emily Carr’s dream as well. To realize this dream, Coghill has dared to bring the “soul stuff” to the stage and to capture the “song” in a startling piece of theatre that is honest, exciting and wholly original.
STAGING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by SHERRILL GRACE
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Judging from the contemporary Canadian theatre scene, autobiographical plays are enjoying great popularity. From Guillermo Verdecchia to Michel Tremblay, from Linda Griffiths to Sharon Pollock, from Sally Clark (with her play about Artemisia Gentileschi) to Joy Coghill (with hers about Emily Carr), the challenge of writing or performing one’s own or someone else’s life story is fascinating because what an audience ultimately watches on stage both is and is not true to life. By its very nature the theatre transforms experience into art – and a highly collaborative art at that! What we see on stage is not true life but what the playwright selects and shapes and what the performers discover through the craft of acting. Nevertheless, when we recognize an autobiographical subject in a play, we immediately expect historical truth. We expect to find things out, to learn what really happened. But the better the theatre art, the more our expectations will be complicated, our curiosity provoked, and our desire for easy answers forestalled. Life and art are just not that simple. In Song of This Place, which is the best of several plays inspired by Emily Carr, Joy Coghill approaches her subject in a unique way. Yes, she portrays key events in Carr’s life, but she also raises interesting questions about why one artist would want to write a play about the life of another artist and about how the art of theatre can capture the essence of a painter’s life and recreate that life on stage.

Anyone familiar with Carr’s story will realize that Coghill has read the biographies and autobiographies, that she has discussed Carr with experts, and that she has studied Carr’s paintings. But this background work is the tip of the iceberg. To write the play and then to perform the role of Frieda (which she did at the 1987 premiere), Coghill had to face certain aspects of herself and her own life story, and it was this honesty that enabled her to wrestle the play and the indomitable spirit of Emily Carr into a creative form. Although she is reticent about her autobiography, the play demonstrates that to create her “Millie” she had to let go of reservations and personal control in order to locate that private place within herself where she could discover Carr’s significance for her. Song of This Place tells us less about Carr’s forests and canvasses than it does about the autobiographical self-as-artist. To reach that autobiographical place is, in the words of Emily Carr, to pull “into visibility what every soul has a right to keep private.” In many ways, Song of This Place is Joy Coghill’s self-portrait as Emily Carr. She has dared to ask if theatre can match painting and if her professional dedication and art (whether as actor or writer) can match Carr’s. Her answer is yes, not because this play is better than that painting but because both arts demand a life of continuous artistic performance and a profound belief in one’s art and one’s self.

“Emily Carr, August 1930, with Woo and the Griffon” Taken in the Simcoe Street garden by Nan Cheney, Capilano, BC. Vancouver Art Gallery Archives.
Where is “this place”?  
What are its qualities?  
How can we go there?

Below are most of the lines the actors will speak that refer to the present place of the onstage moment(s), in Song of This Place. The playwright has also added stage directions to describe the place where the play-actions transpire. “The stage should suggest a deep forest, etc....”

“...here’s a marvelous convenient place for our rehearsal.”  
(a reference, as you may know, to a line from A Midsummer Night’s Dream by Shakespeare)

“Will you look at those trees!”  
“...Lovely Emily Carr trees...”

“...we could be in the theatre doing a run-through...but we are not...we’re here...”

“... in a clinic in England...”

“...hung her chairs from the ceiling”  
(describing Emily Carr’s parlour)  
“... chairs on pulleys...”

“Outside my window is a fuscia bush...”

“Sure is peaceful in my graveyard...” “I found this settlement on the edge of the forest...called Victoria.”

“Victoria is such a small place...”

“Here in your forest your power is paramount...”  
(referring to Emily Carr’s forest)

“...Deeper...To a place where dancing is possible.”

And, of course, the Song at the very end of the play describes a place.

So “this place” is a spot convenient for rehearsal, also clinical, with lovely Emily Carr trees, chairs hanging from the ceiling, a fuscia bush, perhaps a bed and a window, and which is a graveyard, and small Victoria, at the edge of a forest, where a painter’s power is paramount. And it is another place, deeper, where dancing might happen.

But as you will see...all of these things – like the old trees that once stood where you sit tonight – are ephemera, that exist only in our imaginations – the “place between” the participants in tonight’s revels, the place about which the Song is sung.
set design by
Robert Gardiner
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puppet and mask design by
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"Frieda", preliminary costume sketch by Marcus Wu

"Harold", puppet in progress, by Trish Leeper

"Millie", preliminary costume sketch by Marcus Wu
EMILY CARR: AN ENIGMATIC, ECCENTRIC HEROINE

by SCOTT WATSON
Director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

Even though the literature on Emily Carr (1871-1945) continues to grow she remains a misunderstood figure. Her own journals tell us how misunderstood and isolated she felt. Even after she achieved national fame she hung onto the idea that her society was hostile to her painting. Almost fifty years after her death her stature as a painter is not a settled issue. There is little doubt that she has a place in the pantheon of Canadian modernism where she is considered the equal and perhaps better than the best of the Group of Seven (depending where you are from). However, she has yet to secure her place in twentieth century art history at large, alongside, say Georgia O’Keefe or Frida Kahlo, despite decades of lobbying by Canadian curators and scholars and despite the success of feminist interventions in the rewriting of art history.

We mythologize our own west-coast identity around her story. We think she is heroic, but largely for confronting the provincialism we paradoxically indulge in when we tell her story. She felt very rooted in British Columbia and had an intense rapport with our forests, waters and skies. She researched First Nations art and incorporated it into her own work. She didn’t like travelling and hated big cities. Her sense of belonging and rootedness was intense (we know this from her writing). She was born here but as an advanced painter she was quite out of place. Her feeling of belonging and at the same time feeling out of place characterizes the colonial state of mind. Today we think we are outgrowing this insecure state of mind but we still call our province British Columbia.

Emily Carr is famous for four main groups of paintings and for the books she wrote in the last years of her life. An avid student, Carr went to art schools in San Francisco and England. But her moment of conversion came when she studied in Paris at the age of thirty (1910-11). There she encountered modern painting and became a Fauve, taking up their bright, unmixed colours. These paintings were the most advanced paintings made by a Canadian artist up to that time. Her work was shown in prestigious exhibitions. A European career seemingly lay before her, but she chose to return to the very unsophisticated city of her birth.

Besides the modernist paintings, her other great early works were the result of travels she took to Northern British Columbia between 1906 and 1910 and again in 1912. She resolved to document First Nations monumental art and architecture. While engaged with First Nations art she became convinced of its importance and of the necessity of learning from it to create a Canadian art independent from the model of Europe. On her own and several years before the Group of Seven came together, she became the first modern Canadian painter of Canadian subject matter.

The years between Paris, her studies of native communities, and her “discovery” in 1927 were unproductive and, one gathers, unhappy. She became known in Victoria not as an artist but as a colourful crackpot who kept pet monkeys. But when she was included in an important National Gallery Canada exhibition in 1927 and came to the attention of the Canadian art world, Lawren Harris in particular, she bloomed. It is extraordinary to realize that almost all her great work and all the paintings of rain forests and skies that characterize her most in our imagination were painted after she had turned fifty-six.

Her mature works are of roughly two kinds. In the late twenties and early thirties she created ambitious oil paintings that attempted to create a style that would combine European modernism and native art. The best of these depict the shapes of the forest and land metamorphosing into her cubist version of native design. Her last works are oil paintings on paper. These sing with energy and life.

The mature works celebrate the renewing forces of nature. We don’t so often discuss the important admonitory sub-themes; the ravages of the forest industry, the decay of all man-made structures and the sexual anguish to be found in the twisted roots of beached stumps.

Despite her familiarity to us, Carr remains enigmatic. Apparently not very intellectual or even sophisticated, she sacrificed every normal happiness to turn herself into the most advanced Canadian painter of her day, a role she was temperamentally ill suited to. We will never know what motivated such an outpouring of determination. However we do know the results of that struggle: her paintings. These art forms serve as the mediums through which Carr’s life experiences and life struggles can continue to speak to us even though the artist herself is now gone.
SINGERS AND THEIR SONGS: PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST ON THE CANADIAN STAGE

by JERRY WASSERMAN
Department of English and Theatre

In Joy Coghill’s *Song of This Place* the painter Millie Carr believes that each place and each being has its own song: “Each thing with its own rhythm, each centre saying, ‘I am, I am... look at me.’” To capture its essence on her canvas the artist needs sufficient imaginative empathy, as Millie says, to “feel the song,” put herself in sync with its rhythms, and translate it into the medium of her own art. Coghill’s alter ego in the play, the actress/playwright Frieda, struggles in turn to capture the essence of Emily Carr, to find her rhythm and her centre, to achieve perfect sympathy with the song of Carr’s “I am,” woman to woman and artist to artist, and translate her life into theatrical art. In doing so Coghill takes her place in a rich Canadian dramatic tradition.

Portraits of the artist abound on the Canadian stage, perhaps because, as Canadian playwrights have long complained, art and artists have traditionally been undervalued here. In Robertson Davies’ *Fortune, My Foe* (1949) an immigrant European puppet-master is told that Canadian philistinism “will freeze your heart with folly and ignorance.” (He vows to stick it out anyway, proclaiming that “a real artist is very, very tough.”) In David French’s backstage comedy *Jitters* (1979), a Canadian actor dreams of going to the U.S where they embrace artistic success, whereas “up here it’s like stepping out of line.” The theatrical biography validates the artist and valorizes the art.

Sometimes the affinities between the playwright and the artist-subject seem immediately evident. Sally Clark, herself a painter, explores the life of her artistic foremother, 17th century female painter Artemisia Gentileschi, in *Life Without Instruction*. Raised in the Maritimes, John Gray crafts a musical about a Maritime musician (*Don Messer’s Jubilee*). Gay playwright Sky Gilbert takes as his subject gay playwright Tennessee Williams (*My Night with Tennessee*). Transplanted New Yorker Sheldon Rosen, whose middle name is Edward, writes about a New York playwright named Edward Sheldon (*Ned and Jack*). Already knowing some of the song maybe makes it easier to sing.

In other cases the connections seem even deeper. Among the many theatrical interpreters of Emily Carr’s life and art, Cree-Québécoise writer Jovette Marchessault is equally well known as a sculptor. Marchessault counts among her signature works of sculpture female figures resembling totem poles. In her play *Le voyage magnifique d’Emily Carr*, she interprets Carr’s paintings of west coast totems as attempts to access the power of female spirituality contained within them. The “magnificent voyage” of Carr’s spiritual artistry also resonates with Marchessault’s own multi-volume autobiography which is filled with journeys figured as spiritual quests. Similarly, Linda Griffiths’ one-woman play about Canadian poet Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Alien Creature*, represents a kind of channeling of the one artist by the other, a solo for two voices. Griffiths claims to have felt possessed by the spirit of the dead poet while working on the script, inspiring her to write her own poems which she wove into the play among MacEwen’s. In the program Griffiths wrote: “She and I are doing this play, and only both of us can speak.”

The metatheatrical strategies Coghill employs to construct her imagined version of Emily Carr include the use of masks and puppets, puppet manipulators, actors and a musician, all playing multiple roles in what resembles a complex symphony more than a simple song. Other playwrights utilize equally elaborate dramaturgical devices to reflect the multifaceted nature of the artist and his/her art. In *Glenn*, David Young’s psychodramatic portrait of pianist Glenn Gould, Gould is played by four different actors simultaneously. Three actresses portray Canadian silent film actress/director Nell Shipman in Sharon Pollock’s *Moving Pictures*. In having the actress Frieda re-play Millie’s life under Carr’s own direction, Coghill pays homage to Pollock’s most famous play, *Blood Relations*, in which the notorious Lizzie Borden helps direct her actress friend in reconstructing the events of Lizzie’s life leading up to the infamous axe-murders. The song of that place has a rather more violent tune.

“Forest Interior” by Emily Carr, 1932, oil on paper.
Collection: Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, UBC.
Gift of Associate Professor Emeritus John A McDonald, 1988
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The Companion Guide to *Song of This Place* is sponsored by Theatre at UBC and generously supported by The Faculty of Arts