Theatrical Activism in Vancouver: From the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood of BC to Marie Clements's *The Road Forward* and Back…

by Selena Couture

On the final day of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, the Aboriginal Pavilion showcased a six-day run of *The Road Forward*, a musical performance installation created and directed by Marie Clements, composed by Jennifer Kreisberg, and choreographed by Michael Greyeyes. Clements filmed the technical rehearsal for this performance and developed it into an award-winning music video that toured film festivals in North America and Europe and can be viewed online ("History of Development" 2).[1] Red diva projects (Clements and Michelle St. John's company) developed a full-length "Aboriginal blues/rock multi-media musical" that was staged for one night only at the 2013 Vancouver PuSh International Performing Arts Festival cabaret, and was subsequently remounted in the 2015 PuSh Festival program for a three-night run.[2] Since a full analysis of all four iterations is beyond the scope of this article, I will mainly discuss the 2013 live performance as it was the fullest blend of phenomenological performance modes emphasizing the theatrical tensions between presence and absence.

There is a history in Vancouver of Indigenous theatrical intervention during mega-events that aims to interrupt a colonial understanding of authentic Indigeneity as

static culture of the past. Clements invokes this history in her tribute to the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood of BC and, using these multiple modes of performance, demonstrates a continuing Indigenous presence.

Before I begin my analysis of the performance, however, I would also like to link this work with some of Rebecca Schneider's ideas of historical reenactment. Schneider uses a feminist application of affect (the critical study of emotions, feelings, senses, and atmospheres) to resist historical binaries in performance studies such as text versus embodied gesture or live versus recorded performance. She situates affect in between, as jumping between bodies and time, moving *us*. Schneider attaches affect to the notion of *temporal drag* and *reach*, or flexible, nonlinear time. The past can be dragged into the present while the present also reaches into the future, which contributes to the "interaction or *inter(in)animation* of one time with another" (31). An analysis of the phenomenological acting modes that use affective engagement will explain how Clements's performance installation blends past, present, and future to inspire a continuation of activism. I am using here modes described by Bert States in "The Actor's Presence: Three Phenomenal Modes." His modes are: the *self-expressive,* during we have an awareness of the virtuosic artistry of the actor (26); the *collaborative,* which breaks down the distance between performer and audience, making a more dynamic relationship possible, one that says "we are in this together" (29, 33); and the *representational,* which is in the "key of *he, she, it* and *they*" when an actor becomes a character (33).

The theatre program for *The Road Forward* was designed to replicate the Native Brotherhood of BC's (NBBC's) newspaper, *The Native Voice*. It explicitly connected the performance with the activism of the Brotherhood and Sisterhood (between the 1930s and

1970s), the Constitution Express (1980s), and the contemporary Idle No More movement (2012–ongoing).[3] In her program notes, Clements writes:

> *The Road Forward* was and is an opportunity to create something that can *sing* inside an audience—the possibility to place this little known history inside *our collective voice*…not just so we get to know it, but so that we get to understand it is a part of ourselves…so that it can make us stand taller, appear bigger, move forward understanding that creating change for the better is a long tradition. ("Writer/Director's Statement" 3, emphasis mine)

The performance presents the singers and musicians in a self-expressive performance mode, singing compositions that integrate traditional[4] and contemporary music, while also performing representationally as historical personae to bring attention to local Indigenous histories. Projections of archival documents also aided in the re-presenting of these histories. At points during the performance the projection design also included a live video stream and Twitter feed allowing for a collaborative performance mode, asserting the contemporary connections to the heritage of the absent activists and ancestors. I will briefly detail a 1946 example of the NBBC's theatrical activism and then move on to an analysis of Clements's show, which circulates uncontained continuing identities that through their presentation insist on affective connections and historical *inter(in)animations* with the present and future.

Intervening in Colonial Celebrations (1946)

The NBBC was founded in 1931 "to promote…higher standards of education, health and living conditions" (Native Brotherhood, "Our Purpose"). It is the oldest active Native organization in Canada and continues to "facilitate the implementation of management and development strategies that focus on capacity building" (Native Brotherhood, "About Us").[5] In July 1946, the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood became involved in the City of Vancouver's 60th anniversary celebration. A poster advertising city-wide events describes "The Jubilee Show," which ran for twelve nights at the Timber Bowl in Stanley Park and featured a cast numbering 4,200 people in what was described as a "dramatic pageant of Vancouver's History." At the bottom of the poster, it announced: "As an Added Attraction, Be Sure to See the INDIAN VILLAGE" which included "Tribal Rituals…Fire Dances…The Pulse-Stirring THUNDERBIRD DANCE!! and many other wonder of Indian lore and customs that White Men have not yet been privileged to see" (Vancouver Citizens).

<Insert Photo 1 Here>

While the *Indian Village and Show* sounds like it could have been rife with cultural appropriation, it was instead, an opportunity for the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood to further the agenda of recognition for Indigenous welfare and rights. The Diamond Jubilee Citizen's Committee commissioned the show, asking for the NBBC's help in organizing it. The event happened on the site of the village called sə□aqʷ in hə□□əmi□ə□ and Sen'ákw in Skwxwú7mesh, also known as the Kitsilano Indian Reserve (or today's Vanier Park), and it was an example of cooperation between a civic committee and an organization that represented the native population of BC. The

program featured an explanation of the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood organizations with photos of the executives in suits. It then had a welcome attributed to August Jack Khahtsahlano saying that the village has been "set once again upon the soil" where his grandfather stood welcoming visitors. It states, "This was our land and now we share it with you. Feel secure there is enough for all" ("Vancouver Diamond Jubilee" 2–4). This statement is significant in that the land had been illegally taken from Coast Salish people in 1913 when they were removed and their houses were burnt (Roy 87–93). Two pages name the forty dancers described as performing nightly on a "Giant Tom-Tom," as well as the musicians and the dances ("Vancouver Diamond Jubilee" 11–12). Dan Cranmer, host of the significant 1921 Cranmer Potlatch, was the announcer of the dances (U'mista Cultural Centre; Thornton). The final event was a ceremony proclaiming the Governor General of Canada, war-hero Viscount Alexander, an honorary chief. According to the description in the program, Alexander presented himself and was escorted by eighteen Indigenous veterans to a dais where NBBC President William Scow performed the ceremony in "native tongue" (likely Kwa□wala), which was then interpreted (Vancouver Diamond Jubilee 15; "Governor General" 2).

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The NBBC carefully controlled the documentation of the *Indian Village and Show*, and Scow was quoted repeatedly in the media as the city committee failed to provide adequately for the performers (Hawker 117–122). The only photo documentation that exists is of the final ceremony making Governor General Alexander an honorary chief (see photo above). There are various ways to consider this event as activism: performing dances during this time of the potlatch ban was a chance to pass on cultural knowledge; the ceremony involving the governor general and the Indigenous veterans, spoken in Kwa□wala, was conducted at a time when Indigenous men were being denied veteran benefits and when Indigenous languages were being suppressed in Indian Residential Schools. While the Diamond Jubilee was not a mega-event by our current standards, it did draw a large audience and the NBBC used its organizational structure to intervene in the celebration. For the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, the opportunity to transfer knowledge and represent Indigenous people to a larger public made it worth engaging with colonial attitudes fetishizing "Indian lore" as "pulse-stirring" in order to strengthen their political position. Sixty-four years later, during the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and afterwards, the form and context for theatrical activism was much different, although the archives of *The Native Voice* and the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood were a major source of inspiration for Marie Clements's *The Road Forward*, which I turn to now.

Inter(in)animating the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood

<Insert Photo 2 here. AUTHOR REQUEST: Please crop image so that the focus is on the three women in the white dresses at the centre>

Although *The Road Forward* is not exactly an historical reenactment, Schneider's terms are useful in helping us think about how the performance revives history and connects it with the present. By isolating those moments of how various performance modes contribute to the temporal drag that creates the present contact between artists/activists and their ancestors, I demonstrate the significance of the use of music, stage, and projection design in the reenactment of the NBBC archives.

The singers' have a strong self-expressive presence. The ensemble sang eighteen songs, ten of which had lyrics by Marie Clements and were mainly composed by Jennifer Kreisberg and/or Wayne Lavallee. Two songs were covers. One was the Native American band Redbone's 1974 hit "Come and Get Your Love" described by the band leader and contributing composer, Morgan James Peters (a.k.a. Mwalim), as "a tribute to REDBONE and Vegas Lolly, as well as a statement about Idle No More being all about NDN [slang for "Indian"] and first [sic] Nation People getting our love/ what we are entitled to" (Peters). The other cover was of Labelle's 1975 disco hit "Lady Marmalade." These songs allow the singers—St. John, Kreisberg along with Cheri Maracle–to soar and show off a range and vocal power that makes me aware of their presence as supremely talented people. In Peter Dickinson's review of the show, he noted that they were the vocal soul of a galvanizing evening ("PuSh 2013: The Road Forward").

This focus on the women's voices also underscores the intention of honouring women activists and community members past and present. This includes the Native Sisterhood of BC, memorializing missing and murdered Aboriginal women, the powerful women from Saskatoon who spurred the Idle No More movement, and Chief Teresa Spence, whose six-week hunger strike had ended only a week previous to this performance. The strength of all these women's voices is represented in St. John, Kreisberg, and Maracle's performances. The artistry of these women singers as well as the other musicians overtly commands our attention. So while they are costumed in 1960s Supremes style to evoke a past era, and some of the musical choices also support this past-ness, as do the projected archival materials, their self-expressive *presence* kept asserting *the present.*

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Another way we are kept aware of the present moment is through the use of multiple collaborative performance elements by which Clements shifts awareness back and forth between the audience and performers. The Club PuSh performance space at Performance Works is set up cabaret-style and most of the audience space is made up of chairs surrounding small tables, encouraging audience members to be aware of each other and interact. The show opens with people coming in through the audience, singing and drumming. Xále□/Sekyú Siyám, Chief Ian Campbell of the Squamish Nation, sings a

Canoe Journey Song, and then another, unidentified older man, speaks in hə□ □əmi□ə□ and translates his welcome. Thus the opening is a direct connection to our presence on Coast Salish lands, following welcoming protocols and an indication of how this intra-nation Indigenous performance is also a grounded practice. The performative mode here is one of direct connection between the speakers and witnesses.

In a further effort to unsettle the usual performer/audience viewing perspective, after the musicians entered and started an instrumental opening to the show, a projection of three women in a dressing room lights up a large frame-style hand drum that is propped up at the front of the stage. At first it was unclear whether this is recorded footage, or live-streamed. The women are fixing their makeup in a mirror and putting finishing touches on their costumes. This viewing feels like eyewitnessing rather than gazing behind the scenes. The music mounts as they get ready, then leave the dressing room and make their way through the building to backstage with their images still being projected on the drum. We start to hear singing, from somewhere behind, and then finally they burst onto the stage. Like the placement of the seating, and the opening welcome songs, this detail alerts us to the stage as a place of performance and then as the singing starts, folds us back into our roles as audience members (see photo above).

The closing images returned to this collaborative mode. As the evening starts to wind up, ushers circulate through the audience giving out 3D glasses. The images are then projected in 3D as more performers come onstage—and everyone sings West Coast–style traditional songs (which were not named either in the program or by performers). While this is going on, the drum, which has been used as a screen on and off through the show, now has a live Twitter stream projected on it. It takes me a while to understand that

the tweets are from other audience members. The tweets as well as the combination of the professional and amateur performers singing traditional and contemporary music while 3D archival and contemporary images float behind them are yet another assertion of live continuity. It's also significant that this is happening as #IdleNoMore is all over the Twitter-sphere, and the movement has been mentioned repeatedly over the evening, connecting the current activism with the historic work. This use of projected images also brings to mind Schneider's assertions about the "future that subsists in the still." Schneider suggests that the "future subsists not only *in* the photo but *through* the 'we' who look to 'rediscover it' as 'still'—'still' in the sense of the term that signifies remaining, more than silence and motionlessness" (161–162). These layered moments of performance as the event concludes bring the collapse of the present and the historical to a crescendo.

A major focus of the work, as I've mentioned, is to represent historical archival material through the use of costume, images, and, most significantly for this next example, song lyrics. Ron Dean Harris (a.k.a. Ostwelve), sings a song based on the words of a speech by George Manuel, a šəxʷepməx leader influential in Canadian and international Indigenous organizing. Manuel was instrumental in the national organizing against the Trudeau's "White Paper,"[6] and internationally he was involved in the creation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. He also coordinated support to ensure the protection of Aboriginal rights within the Canadian Constitution, as a major organizer of the Constitution Express (Center for World Indigenous Studies; Hanson). Ostwelve's song was called "If You Really Believe." It was a hip-hop style iteration of a 1979 speech by Manuel ("Education Workshop"); the song lyrics repeatedly assert

Manuel's words: "if you really believe that education for our children, (or health care, or housing…) is our right…you don't ask for it… you take it." Ostwelve's performance is riveting, aggressive, and emotional (see photo below). He holds his lower body still, stares straight out at the audience, and slowly gestures with his hand, holding his drum at the group of people watching him as he addresses them directly. His skill as a performer was on display while at the same time he represented George Manuel's speech, thereby connecting our present with this past.

<Insert Photo 3 here. Author Request: Please crop so that it is possible to see the expression on the singer's face [Ron Harris] while still including the full projection of George Manuel on the back wall.>

As Clements herself points out in the program, the event is a fusing of ink and voice. She is playing with words here as she discusses the influential newspaper, the *Native Voice*, and directing the audience's attention to the voices of the singers and artists we encounter at the event. Her choice of a musical as the form to express this history is significant. Song and music, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins point out in *Postcolonial Drama*, can be "'detached' from the theatre event by the audience to live on after the performance's conclusion when the audience retells or [re-sings] parts of the theatrical presentation as an act of memory" (194). Music can also be a powerful transmitter of intense emotional affect. And even more significantly, as I consider the chiasmatic meeting of the present with the past, playing music is not only mimetic representation, but also a *making* of music. It is both action and representation, "the beloved and often discussed conundrum of theatricality in which the represented bumps uncomfortably (and ultimately undecidably) against the affective, bodily instrument of

the real" (Schneider 41). So as the musicians, singers, and artists perform, inspired by the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, whether they were performing original compositions, texts of activist ancestors, or even covers of 1970s pop songs, they are always in the present tense, expressing emotion in a way that travels with audience members out of the venue and into the future.

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Conclusion: A Continuum of Movement

These iterations of this performance have thus far garnered attention from various audiences globally. The dense layering of self-expressive, collaborative, and representational performance modes in a musical format successfully *inter(in)animate* the activist continuum of First Nations peoples—those alive, working, and performing right now, along with generations of their ancestors. The significance of this is not just in the assertion of a continuing presence against the uninformed view that Indigenous peoples

of the Americas tragically vanished. While this is (unfortunately) still necessary at times, this event is also significant for its demonstration of the effectiveness of using various phenomenological performance modes to fold time. *The Road Forward* briefly opens a place where the people posing and looking at the camera in old photos, or the writers who committed their ideas to paper, can be understood to have been active in their own time while at the same time their eyes and words reach to the future, ready for our gaze to reanimate them. Having these archival works floating through the air (in 3D!) while the singers perform history through songs passed on by a physical repertoire is a blending of Indigenous and Western historiographic methods. These works are layered and balanced in such a way that neither the present not the past takes precedent: times coexist depending on which mode the audience member chooses to access.

In the context of the Idle No More movement, *The Road Forward* reenactment of the NBBC archives also demonstrates how this kind of *inter(in)animation* can be part of a revolution. In this time of resurging activity and strength, a connection with the power of those who have passed, not merely by understanding their historical facts of their activities but by summoning their presence, will contribute to the forward momentum or a *temporal reach*. The song by the same title as Clements's piece *The Road Forward*[7] summarizes this resurgence:

> I feel you beside me, I know your name.
> I hear your voice becoming ours, it is the same …
>
> I feel your breath, I know your pain, I hear you cry.

We carry the load together, you and I.

The words themselves are powerful, and even as I write them out I feel a bit of a tingle up my spine, responding to the summoning to carry the load. I hope that my reader is also similarly affected. As has been demonstrated through this article, Indigenous political organizers and artists have made use of theatrical activism to intervene in mega-events for many decades. Clements's recent work, through her deployment of phenomenological acting modes, has added a nuance to the possibilities of a respectful collaborative engagement with present Indigeneity while also honouring the past activists who have made this present possible.

Notes

1 A trailer for the PuSh 2015 performance can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HoQMj_pHp4 .

2 Please note, images of *The Road Forward* accompanying this article are from the 2015 event. They represent recurring staging choices (e.g. costuming, projection images) used in all iterations to date

3 Clements points this out directly in her program notes: "photographs from the Constitution Express, besides the obvious difference in clothing and hairstyles, look fairly similar to the photos and videos you've no doubt seen of the Idle No More protests" (Club PuSh 2).

4 I use the term *traditional* here to describe songs that are based on Indigenous cultural knowledge that has been passed down through generations, employing forms, lyrics, and musicality that is connected to past practices but also responsive to contemporary experience.

5 The Native Brotherhood website does not include information about the founding of the Native Sisterhood. It is mentioned in the program to the 1946 event as providing food and lodging support during conventions but not having voting privileges (Indian Village and Show). Clements's *The Road Forward* explicitly credits the Native Brotherhood *and* Sisterhood, and it seems that this is her effort to retroactively credit the

women's work. Following her lead I will also refer to the Brotherhood and Sisterhood as working together.

6 The 1969 "White Paper" was a policy paper put forward by Pierre Trudeau and Minister of Indian Affairs Jean Chrétien aiming to put an end to the legal relationship between Canada and the Aboriginal peoples, through the dismantling of the Indian Act. It was met with great opposition by Indigenous leaders as it was considered another attempt at assimilation (UBC First Nations and Indigenous Studies). The political organizing in response to the White Paper could be compared to the effects of Bill C-45 and the Idle No More movement.

7 Also melding her artwork with activism, Clements donates all proceeds of the sale of the MP3 or DVD of this work to a scholarship for children of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. Both are available through the red diva projects website: reddiva.ca.

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About the Author

Selena Couture recently completed her PhD at the University of British Columbia in Theatre. Her dissertation titled "χʷaχʷɔ and Stanley Park: Performing History and Land" explores Indigenous and settler performances used to transfer knowledge, identity and connection to land near this Coast Salish village site in Vancouver. She has published articles in *Theatre Journal*, *CTR*, and *alt.theatre*, and a chapter in *Recasting Commodity and Spectacle in the Indigenous Americas*.

Abstract: Analyzing the phenomenological performance modes balanced in Marie Clements's production of *The Road Forward* during the 2013 Vancouver PuSh festival, I also examine the previous iteration of the project at the Aboriginal Pavilion during the 2010 Winter Olympics. I assert that this production is a continuation of the use of performance as intervention during mega-event in Vancouver by Indigenous performers

and activists, linking it to the Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood of British Columbia's *Indian Village and Show* during the 1946 celebration of Vancouver's Diamond Jubilee.

Keywords: Native Canadian theatre, Marie Clements, Idle No More, Native Brotherhood of British Columbia; NBBC; PuSh Festival; phenomenological acting modes

Photo 1: Chief William Scow and party reading a declaration to confer an honorary chieftainship on Lord Alexander. 13 July 1946.
Photo by Jack Lindsay, City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 1184-3247

Photo 2: "The Road Forward" ensemble. PuSh Festival. Vancouver: York Theatre. February 2015.
Photo by Tim Matheson

Photo 3: Ron Dean Harris (OsTwelve) performing "If You Really Believe"; Projection of George Manuel in background. PuSh Festival. Vancouver: York Theatre. February 2015.
Photo by Tim Matheson