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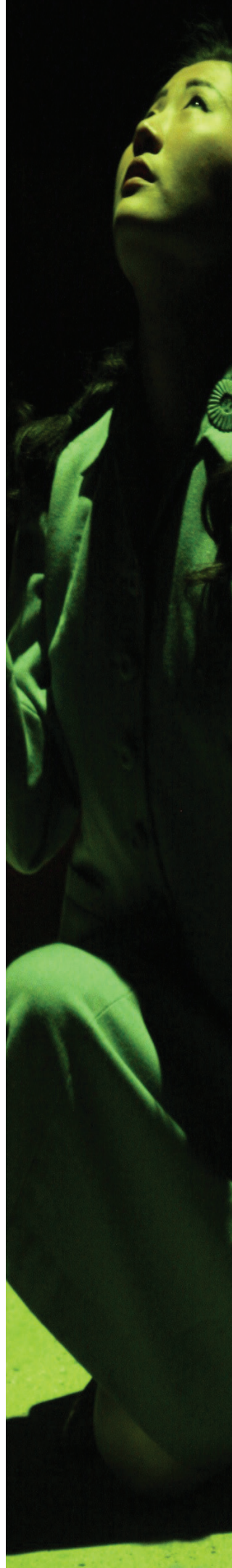
Kneading Marie Clements' *Burning Vision*

by Theresa J. May

I placed a fragrant loaf of freshly baked bread on the table as my production team gathered to consider staging *Burning Vision* by Marie Clements for the University of Oregon. We broke the loaf open, passed it around, and ripped off hunks of its crisp, brown exterior, revealing the soft, still warm, multigrain flesh. Bread, I explained, was at the centre of my director's concept.

Burning Vision tells an untold story of the making of the first atomic bomb, and on first read it is daunting and difficult to digest. Clements' intricate weaving of spatial and temporal images sent our costume design professor into a verbal flurry. She complained that Clements' play was another example of "postmodernism's arbitrary fragmentation" of stories, places, and characters. How is one to make sense of such a thing? Indeed, how do we talk about the "world of a play" in which conventional boundaries of time and space evaporate, and different historical moments overlap in a kind of double and triple exposure? We would discover that no amount of text analysis could clarify the meanings of this play; only live performance could reveal its inner workings.

As artistic director of Earth Matters on Stage, which has twice sponsored an international playwriting contest for new eco-dramas, I am interested in how the art of theatre might respond to the ecological crisis.¹ For example, what kinds of dramatic structures, characters, themes, performance venues, scenographic elements, and developmental processes produce theatrical work that fire our ecological imaginations?² Theatre, it seems to me, can help leverage what Una Chaudhuri has called an ecological "transvaluation so profound as to be nearly unimaginable at present" (24). To do so, however, it must not only critique the current state of affairs, but also increasingly provoke sustainable, compassionate, and just ways of being in the world. *Burning Vision* both employs





Kelly Kern-Craft and Maggie Corona-Goldstein appear (l-r) in a scene from the University of Oregon's 2010 Production of *Burning Vision* by Marie Clements, directed by Theresa J. May. Photo by Jonathon Taylor

and requires dramaturgical strategies that unlock theatre's potential to effect ecological healing. It also provides an example of what I have begun to call *ecodramaturgy*: that is, play-making (script development and production) that puts ecological reciprocity and community at the centre of its theatrical and thematic intent. With this in mind, my purpose here is to provide readers with a taste of the discoveries I made in the staging of Clements' play, a process that began around a table, sharing bread.³

Certain events call us—all humanity—to the same

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table. The implications of such events must be of such a magnitude that their message of interconnectivity cannot be ignored. Climate change is surely one. The detonation of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 was another. *Burning Vision* begins with a countdown, followed by the "sound of a long, far-reaching explosion that explodes over a long, far-reaching time" (19). The arc of the play then transpires in the split second between that first flash of light and its reign/rain of sudden death. In this time-outside-of-time, the play makes visible a web of human agency that binds together places, people, and

creatures.

The play grew out of Clements' desire to trace her family's history in the Northwest Territories. "I had taken a trip to the Great Bear Lake region with my mother. I wanted to tell this story of my family's genetic connection to the history of the land up there, and to the running of uranium" (Personal Interview).⁴ The play follows the route of the ore—claimed by white prospectors and mined on Dene land—from the first decision to unearth it, through the labouring of the miners and "sandwich girls," the Dene ore carriers, and the captains and stevedores who worked along its watery passage across Great Bear Lake and down the Mackenzie River to Fort McMurray. There it was loaded on trains bound for Ontario refineries and, eventually, the labs and test sites of the Manhattan Project.⁵ Weaving together stories of those who worked in the mine with the stories of the victims in Hiroshima, Clements challenges how we remember and *whom*



Sharing bread: (l-r) Brandon Hudson as "Captain Mike" and Maggie Corona-Goldstein as "Rose" in Clements' *Burning Vision*. Photo by Ariel Ogden

we remember, creating a transnational countergeography that makes previously invisible relationships explicit and meaningful.⁶ The LaBine Brothers (the prospectors who laid “claim” to the uranium), a Miner, a Riverboat Captain, Stevedores, a Dene Widow, a Japanese fisherman and his Grandmother in Hiroshima, a Radium Dial Painter, and Tokyo Rose, a fictional radio personality of World War II—these are some of the members of the multi-ethnic community that Clements assembles. Two others—Fat Man, a “test dummy” who lives in a mock home in Nevada’s Jornada del Muerto, and Little Boy, “a beautiful Native boy” and “the darkest uranium found at the center of the earth”—are also, in the dreamtime of Clements’ theatre, personifications of bombs (14). In the midst of this diverse and metaphorically resonant community, Rose, a young Métis woman, makes bread.

According to the oral account of Dene elders (which, under Canadian law, carry the same authority as written eye witness accounts), the whites traded sacks of flour for the ore: “They say it was . . . Beyonnie, who first found the money rock at Port Radium. Beyonnie gave it to the white man, for which he

received a bag of flour, baking powder and lard about four times” (Gilday 108). Memory of this exchange is called up early in the play when the Brothers LaBine remark, “What’s an Indian gonna do with money? . . . We’ll give him some lard and baking powder and he can bake some bread. Sure! What the hell! What the hell is an Indian going to do with a rock anyways, as least he can eat the bread” (37). Bread, then, as payment for the ore, serves as a commodity in the transactions between whites and Dene. As a metonym for the body—flesh that becomes flesh—loaves of bread on stage ironically take the round shape of the flesh-destroying bomb. In our production, the making of bread became a metaphor for the performance itself: the images and actions that rose in our imaginations and were shared with the audience around the community table of the stage.

The verb “to make,” according to the short edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2007), has many meanings. Clements’ play is about making: making bread, making bombs, making enemies, making love, making family, and about taking responsibility for what we have made. “What was extraordinary

to me,” Clements reflects, “was that one person’s decision not only impacts that person and their community, but has an effect beyond—in this case, an effect that encompasses the whole world.” In almost every case, *making* is a function of relationship that implies transaction, invokes connectivity, and results in a transformation of substance. “The decision to unearth is an extraordinary event. You can’t go back.”⁷

The play’s logic is not postmodern (as the designer worried), but indigenous—and to produce it is to admit that it has something to teach us not only about what we think



The detonation of the atomic bomb in *Burning Vision*. Lighting design by Jarvis Jainer. The full lighting effect in this production lasted several minutes.

Photo by Jonathon Taylor

and feel, but also about how.⁸ The indigenous viewpoint from which the play is written, and which it enacts, allows for simultaneity of past, present and future, in which the spirit world co-exists with the embodied world, in which nothing is inanimate. The uranium rock, the sack of flour, a trout, fire, a caribou hide jacket, a work-boot, and a cherry tree: everything is spirit-filled, alive with presence. The sound of caribou hooves on tundra drives the scene changes, and serves as a reminder of how traditional Dene communities followed the migration of caribou around Great Bear Lake.⁹

When you have lived on the land, taken sustenance from it, buried the dead within it, and maintained a long-standing, generational relationship of mutual care with it and the creatures that dwell there, that land is not only home, it is kin—familial flesh. *Burning Vision* insists on this radical, familial connectivity between and among people, and between people and the more-than-human world. Understood through the Dene worldview, the characters of Little Boy and Fat Man are animations consistent with indigenous understandings of the interplay of self, community, land, and spirit.



(l-r): John Zoller as "Fat Man" and Maggie Corona-Goldstein as "Rose" in Clements' *Burning Vision* at the University of Oregon.

Photo by Jonathon Taylor

As a nuclear "test dummy," the character of Fat Man finds his recipe for the American identity to which he aspires in *Playboy* (29). During the 1940s and 1950s aboveground tests in Nevada included mock homes, complete with foodstuffs, canned goods, appliances, and "test dummies" representing the stereotypical 1950s nuclear family. As the subject position of the bomb, Fat Man animates the mindset that made the bomb. He is ideology incarnate—an all-American male, a "living room soldier" (94). He is also a manikin, a mere construction



Jacinto Magallen as a Dene ore carrier.

Photo by Ariel Ogden

of masculinity, a thing made, like a loaf of bread or a bomb (34). And yet, as he realizes that he—like the ore, the lake, and the air itself—is being used as an instrument of war, even Fat Man is radicalized (13). Finally aware of his connection to the others, he cries out in rage and realization, "This is my neighborhood!" (115).

Calling attention to the flesh of our bodies and that of the plants and animals we take for sustenance, Rose describes herself as a "perfect loaf of bread," one that "is plump with a rounded body and straight sides. I have a tender, golden brown crust which can be crisp, or delicate. This grain is fine and even, with slightly elongated cells; the flesh of this bread is multi-grained" (58). Each of us is just such a grainy substance of self.

We make ourselves, Rose suggests, by the

way we engage the elements of the earth. Environmental historian Richard White has observed in his treatise on nature and work ("Are You an Environmentalist? Or Do You Work for a Living?") that our labour is the site of our kinship with the things of the earth. He argues, "our work—all our work—inevitably embeds us in nature" (185). Work is a way of knowing and an expression of our intimacy with the environment. The working human body in performance, like

Certain events call us—all
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the bread and ore on stage, is also a product of the earth and a site of material exchange. As Rose mixes the ingredients for her bread, sacks of flour become indistinguishable from the sacks of ore. The wind mixes the white flour leaking from Rose's sack with the black dust that infects the *environs* of the play. "The wind's blowing it everywhere," Rose observes, "The kids are playin' in sandboxes of it, the caribou are eating it off the plants, and we're drinkin' the water where they bury it...I guess there's no harm if a bit gets in my dough" (103). Both bread and ore are *material* aspects of the earth's body and, ultimately, our bodies.

Earth, air, water, and fire form the primary signifying patterns in *Burning Vision*, calling attention not only to how we use (what we make with) the material substance of the earth, but how we are commingled with the land around us. The Dene Widow, lamenting the loss of her husband, knows that the land resides in the fabric of our bodies: "I miss the smell of sweat on his clothes after a long day hunting. I miss how the land stayed in the fabric even when he got inside the cabin"



Shirley Cortez as the "Widow" at the University of Oregon's production of Clements' *Burning Vision*.
Photo by Ariel Ogden

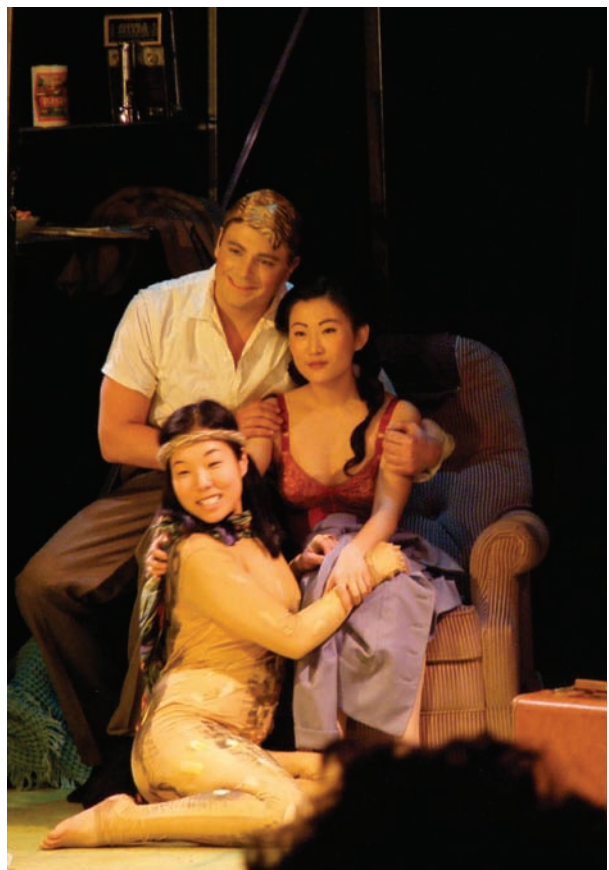
(44–45). In a dream, she pulls him to her, calling on their kinship with the earth, and resisting the doomsday change that she struggles to comprehend. "There are plenty of trout and caribou to last us till we die" (70).

Following the intersection of earth and human hands, the landscape of *Burning Vision* illuminates things made and transfigured, including the transfiguration of the body. In the 1920s and 1930s, radium dial painters, mostly women aged sixteen to twenty, painted clock dials with radium paint so that military personnel could read time in the dark.¹⁰ Encouraged to lick their brushes to produce a fine tip for painting, many radium painters developed disfiguring cancers like radium jaw.¹¹ One of the strategies of eco-drama, seen here, is to show that what we do to the land and what we do on the land is writ in our bodies. When the Radium Painter turns to the Miner "half her face is missing and her beautiful hair is entirely gone" (117). Like the land, we are living archives of our human intimacy with the earth.

Richard White argues that we must "pursue the implications of our labor and our bodies in the natural world" (185). The moral implication of our capacity to take and to make becomes clear when the Widow chides Rose, whose face is white with flour from making bread, "you gonna get

rich like those LaBine Brothers wanna be. They should be prospecting bread, instead of putting their hands on things that shouldn't be touched" (55). Here, Clements, via the wisdom of this Dene Widow, questions economic gain for its own sake, but she also, by implication, asks what else might have been done with the billions of dollars and thousands of human work hours spent on making a weapon that endangered the whole planetary community, and points to the moral uncertainty that would later haunt Manhattan Project workers, most of whom were unaware of the products of their labour (see Fermi).

The element of air in *Burning Vision* incarnates on stage as the wind that sweeps flour into Rose's face and carries cherry blossoms across the sky, as the nuclear wind that hurls waves of radiation across the planet's surface, and as voices on the airwaves. National radio helps construct the rationale for war as the voice of Lorne Greene, Canada's "Voice of Doom," narrates the attack at Pearl Harbor and heralds the U.S. order for more uranium from the Canadian north.¹² Tokyo Rose, a fictional radio personality created to serve as an agent of Japanese propaganda, reminds us that enemies, like bread and bombs, are made: a combination of fears and desires that inform social constructions of "alien." Radio frequencies of the Northern Territory form a palpable web of



A transnational countergeography and a multi-ethnic community. (l-r): John Zoller ("Fat Man"), Jo Niehaus ("Little Boy"), and Barbara Woo ("Round Rose").
Photo by Jonathon Taylor

connection, sustaining kinship and community as Slavey voices broadcast messages to “call home.” This polyphony cascades simultaneously in all directions—a sound montage of caribou galloping on tundra, Dene and Taiko drummers, big band and country music, and the blast of the A-bomb. There are sounds that invite and seduce, warn and inform, deafen and destroy,

What we do to and on the land is writ in our bodies. Like the land, we are living archives of human action.

leaving in the wake of the atomic wind, the soft sound of human suffering.

Great Bear Lake is one of the largest and deepest freshwater lakes in the world, and its presence also percolates through the soundscape of *Burning Vision*. The lake is the centre of life for traditional Dene who depend on it for sustenance (see Gilday, Abel). Dene villages fished for trout and followed the seasonal migration of caribou herds around the lake.¹³ In a Dene legend, a medicine man journeys to the heart of Great Bear Lake. After a “trout steals the medicine man’s hook... he dives deep into the lake’s abyss” to retrieve his hook. He



Barbara Woo as “Round Rose.”
Photo by Ariel Ogden

“takes on the spirit of the loche” and there he finds “a living, breathing heart, called the Tudzé” that gives life to the world of plants, animals and human beings.¹⁴ In Clements’ play, Eldorado’s wet-mine tunnels become liminal passageways that, as the Miner says, “go all the way to China [or Japan].” At the moment of the atomic blast in Hiroshima, a Japanese fisherman named Koji rises with a trout in his hands (could it be Tudzé’s trout?) “Pika!” he cries—the Japanese word for the brilliant flash of atomic detonation—meaning “the light of two suns.” Letting go of the cherry tree where his Obachan (grandmother) told him to wait, Koji falls into darkness, journeys through the tunnels, and surfaces in a later scene, mistaken for a trout in Great Bear Lake. Two stevedores on the Radium Prince haul him out of the water, and Rose gives him dry clothing and the possibility of new life.

Sound and lighting effects carry the memory of the fireball that swept out from ground zero in Hiroshima, vaporizing flesh and turning sand to glass. But there is another fire, too. The Widow keeps a vigil fire kindled by her grief, where she conjures the young Dene husband she lost to the ore. She tends the fire, but is also trapped by it. Traditional Dene practice is to burn the earthly possessions of those who die so that they may cross over¹⁵, but the Widow cannot let go of her lover’s clothes, especially a jacket that she made and beaded.¹⁶ “It is always the little things of his that take my breath away. The real things like a strand of his hair lying on the collar of a caribou hide jacket he loved...the real things like the handle of his

Burning Vision is a note left after the fire.

hunting knife worn down from his beautiful hands that loved me. The real things...” (87–88).

Koji also sites/sights the real, the “little things,” as his spirit roams the post-blast “landscape of notes.” “There are notes left on anything that still exists. On pieces of houses, on stones shivering on the ground, on anything that did not perish...hope remains nailed to what has survived...a tin box of pictures, a rock wall, a rice bowl...a chair, a typewriter, a neighbor, a woman” (51–52). *Burning Vision* is a note left after the fire—a kind of signal “through the flames” that Antonin Artaud called for in the theatre fifty years ago—and it is we, in the present, on whom its hope is pinned (Artaud 12).¹⁷

Making theatre is like making bread. On stage the elements of story, community, space, and presence, like Rose’s “flour, salt, water, lard,” take on a life of their own, rising up with fresh possibility and offering an antidote to the spectre of global annihilation. This is a play that questions how we tell history, and—by affirming community and resisting the dissociation required for enemy making—opens the path for new histories to be laid down. As time stands still and geographies marry, spatial-temporal realities collide, showing

a way out/in/through, a way to remember, and a way to love. The Dene See-er says, “we are answering each other over time and space. Like a wave that washes over everything and doesn’t care how long it takes to get there because it always ends up on the same shore” (75). In the laboratory of theatre, *Burning Vision* is a kind of bomb, one that explodes in our imaginations and our hearts, and reconfigures the world. Bending perception as light bends through space, the action returns to its point of origin, to a place where the very notion of separation is counterfeit.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 Earth Matters on Stage was co-founded by Theresa J. May and Larry K. Fried (who served as artistic director for the 2004 Ecodrama Playwrights Contest at Humboldt State University). EMOS 2009, which included Ecodrama Playwrights Contest and Symposium on Theatre and Ecology, was held at the University of Oregon. Access to program and playwright information for both years can be found at Earth Matters on Stage www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama.
- 2 In the EMOS festivals of 2004 and 2009, we looked for scripts that animated, evoked, and provoked our ecological intelligence and sensibilities. The festival is held every three years at the University of Oregon, Eugene, OR. The next EMOS festival is 2012; see www.uoregon.edu/~ecodrama.
- 3 Produced as part of the University Theatre 2009–10 Season, University of Oregon, 26 February–14 March 2010, directed by Theresa J. May, with set design by Jonathon Taylor, lighting design by Jarvis Jainer, sound design by Ryan Rugsby, and costume design by Erika Hauptman.
- 4 Dene communities are still coping with the health and environmental impact of the radium mining; however, scientific study of long-term health effects on Dene communities has yet to be conducted. See, for example, Abel.
- 5 The array of Manhattan Project locations spanned the United States, and included Chicago, Illinois; Berkeley, California; Oakridge, Tennessee; Hanford, Washington; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and Nevada’s test site at Jornada del Muerto. See Fermi, or Brown.
- 6 “Countergeography” is a term drawn from the discourse of critical globalization studies referring to the strategic re-mapping of people, places, and the effects of globalization. See, for example, Appelbaum and Robinson, 155–166.
- 7 In preparation for directing *Burning Vision*, I spoke with Marie Clements. Gray also discusses the connection between this family history and the play in his paper given at the Earth Matters on Stage Symposium on Theatre, 23 May 2009.
- 8 Paula Gunn Allen, Jaye T. Darby and others discuss the holistic worldview and multidimensionality of space and time in indigenous drama in *American Indian Theater and Performance: A Reader*, Ed. Hanay Geiogamah and Jaye T. Darby. See also Stanlake, especially Chapter 4.
- 9 See Abel, 23–27.
- 10 See, for example, Mullner.
- 11 Radium, like calcium, attaches to the bone, and poisoning typically produced malformations of bone tissue, particularly in the face and jaw. See Mullner.
- 12 The voice of Lorne Greene (of *Battlestar Galactica* and *Bonanza*) became known in Canada as the “Voice of Doom” for his news broadcasts on the CBC during World War II.
- 13 See, for example, Dickason and Abel.
- 14 The legend can be found on the website of the CBC as part of a story about the making of a radio documentary entitled “Waterheart: the Deline Project” in which Dene elders tell their stories about the uranium mining on their land.
- 15 See Abel, 23.
- 16 Dene clothing design is often intricately beaded and highly ornamented. See, for example, Thompson.
- 17 The context of the reference is as follows: “We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theatre, a sense of life in which man fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And everything that has not been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to remain mere recording organisms. Furthermore, when we speak of the word ‘life,’ it must be understood that we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames” (Artaud 12).
- 18 My thanks to Brian Cook for his dramaturgical research for our production of *Burning Vision*, 26 February–13 March 2010. See his production blog on blogspot.com <www.uoburningvision@blogspot.com>.

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