



Taking dance projects into communities

Bill Coleman

Coleman Lemieux & Compagnie (CLC) is a dance company founded in Quebec in 2000. We perform in large and small venues both nationally and internationally, such as New York City Center, the National Arts Centre, Salle Pierre-Mercure and the Peking University Theatre.

James Kudelka is a resident choreographer with the company, and we are currently working in both Montreal and Toronto.

My wife, Laurence, and I first began taking our dance projects out of the theatres and into communities in 1994 with a two-week project on the Heron Bay Reserve in northern Ontario. Since then, the company has integrated the proscenium and site-specific work into its regular operating schedule.

We have worked in Saskatchewan, Newfoundland, Manitoba and Mongolia, creating large site-specific community celebrations that include the performing arts, local crafts and cultural traditions, and, of course, food.

Today I would like to talk about four projects. Except for the last, they all share many things: unique locations and interesting communities, usually under duress, and the events involved audiences of over 600 people. The following four projects are all collaborations with communities or groups, and the subsequent events represent many voices. I will talk about, not the one-on-one exchanges, but the variety of the groups we collaborate with, and the individual environments in which the events take place.



Grasslands: Where Heaven Meets Earth grew out of an intense love of the prairie grasslands of southern Saskatchewan. On deciding to organize a project in this landscape, I approached Grasslands National Park and the neighbouring village of Val Marie (population 150, one hour north of Montana) as the site for the event. Over a two-year period I walked, talked, shook hands and knocked on

doors. At the end of this casual but persistent recruiting, I had gathered a grassroots ensemble consisting of ranchers, farmers, storekeepers, mayors, horse-riding clubs, schools and many, many young people ready, willing and able to assist in the realization of a large dusk-till-dawn celebration of pretty much everything we could think of.

Aided by some interested arts organizations who I asked to help in the finances and organization and the 20 artists I brought or who volunteered, we managed to create a rural celebration in a part of the country hardest hit by the mad cow crisis. In the process we lifted spirits, fixed up eyesores in the village and seemingly endeared the villagers and surrounding residents once again to the way they lived and the people they were in these tough times.



For the **Gros Morne Project: Feel the Earth Move**, we were drawn to the coast, the sea, the hard edge of the continent. Once again I approached a park, this time Gros Morne National Park, and worked closely with two communities in the park, including a tiny former outpost, the fishing village of Trout River.

Bringing distinguished artists from across Canada, we encouraged them to explore and

respond to the environment and people surrounding us. Money was spent in these communities, and the revenues gained stayed in the community. A CBC documentary was made, and as with all of these events, the existence and impact resonated far beyond the boundaries of these remote communities.

Receiving an invitation from a local dance company to create a *Grasslands*-style event in and around Winnipeg, Manitoba, our third event, **From Pointe Shoes to Powwow: The Manitoba Project**, had a very specific focus. In both Newfoundland and Saskatchewan, I had been disappointed in our local partners' inability to work in any meaningful way with the local Aboriginal communities. Winnipeg, home to the largest urban Aboriginal population in North America, was the place where we decided to focus fixedly on working in collaboration with urban and rural Aboriginal communities.

Using dance as the theme, we decided to place some of North America's oldest dance traditions side by side with 20th-century classic works of dance. This was achieved by presenting work by Merce Cunningham in a rural powwow, and the work of George Balanchine, José Limón and James Kudelka in Winnipeg's Thunderbird House, a healing lodge situated in the poorest part of town. And also by letting CLC resident artists, composer John Oswald and Métis visual artist Edward Poitras, and myself loose in the Manitoba Legislature to create. Aboriginal youth at risk performed Ted Shawn's classic work *The Dome*, and local dance organizations were introduced to the surrounding vibrant Aboriginal culture.

My final topic is an initiative underway in North America's oldest public-housing complex, Regent Park in Toronto.



Created in the early 1900s, Regent Park has been a thorn in Canada's side, despite several attempts to "improve" the 70-acre neighbourhood in downtown Toronto. Currently beginning its third incarnation, Regent Park is getting a \$1 billion, 12-year overhaul—totally rebuilt, with forward-thinking urban planning that invites commerce back into the community once more, as well as former public-housing residents, private condo owners, parks, pools and possibly an arts and culture centre.

CLC has taken up residence in Regent Park and is working with private developers, social organizations and community groups to grow the arts into and with the new community by creating an appetite, an interest and opportunity to use the arts along with creative urban planning and the existing social programs to inspire and lift up this unique community.

The Regent Park statistics are staggering:

- 41% of residents are under 16;
- 65% have been in Canada for less than 10 years;
- and it will grow from 11,000 people to 17,000 people during the 12-year revitalization.

It is a unique opportunity. CLC will use its existing expertise in working with communities, and will hopefully grow and evolve new skills with this community to become a more effective and adaptive organization.

If there is anything significant in our work, or these events, I think it is not the fact that people can come together to do amazing things—they do that all the time—but that a small arts organization like ours is able to create and present cultural events anywhere, using limited financial assets and the unlimited creative assets of the communities we work with.

Bill Coleman

Né à Berwick, en Nouvelle-Écosse, Bill Coleman étudie la danse à la Doreen Bird School of Theatre Dance à Londres. Il a créé plus de 50 œuvres présentées au Royaume-Uni, en Italie, à Singapour, en Russie et à travers les États-Unis et le Canada. Il est le cofondateur de Bill Coleman & His North American Experience avec le compositeur John Oswald, de Heartland Events avec Michael Caplan et de Coleman / Lemieux & Compagnie avec sa conjointe Laurence Lemieux. À New York, en 1988, M. Coleman reçoit le Jerome Foundation's First Light Award pour la pièce *Baryshnikov: The Other Story*. En 2002, il devient le lauréat du Prix Jacqueline-Lemieux du Conseil des Arts du Canada pour sa contribution au développement de la danse canadienne. www.colemanlemieux.com