

agit props

the extras speak up and act out

by Vanda Schmöckel

The humble extra has long been relegated to the background, not only of film scenes, but our minds as well. They are employed primarily to fill up the frame, and create a sense of life and realism. They seldom, if ever, approach the forefront of the action and, by their very contractual definition, are forbidden to speak. But for one unseasonably cool late-August evening in Regina, the extra was exalted.

The Extras project was a joint endeavor by Curtain Razors, and Susanne Clausen and Pavlo Keresty (collectively known as the Szupers), in collaboration with Common Weal and the Saskatchewan Filmpool. The performance invited the audience to witness an event that looked at, not just the use of background performers in film production, but the process of production itself, raising questions around what is valued as performance, and what we don't see when watching the final products of an industry that employs hundreds of people in this province alone.

Michele Sereda is the artistic director and co-founder of Curtain Razors, a Regina-based theatre company, and is

no stranger to the world of background performers in film production – she herself has worked as an extra in many television and film productions that have passed through this province.

“The drive behind *The Extras* project was circulating around a couple of thoughts”, Sereda says. “The continued investigation of how visual art, and/or performance art meet with theatre to find new ways of telling stories, to add the medium of film to this investigation, and to provide the Regina community with a project that provides a keyhole view to the world of the film industry through the eyes of performance artists and a theatre artist.”

The impetus for *The Extras* performance in Regina this past summer had its roots in another project of Sereda's last year. In March 2007, Curtain Razors mounted a production of *Laura*, a theatre/installation piece in which Sereda collaborated with artist Eric Metcalfe.

“With *Laura*, Curtain Razors developed a series of



outreach programming to create a discussion on mediums intersecting and to get cross audiences talking and meeting with each other. One of the outreach programs was a panel discussion, *Object as Performance* in collaboration with the MacKenzie Art Gallery moderated by Timothy Long. One of the guests on that panel was curator Lorna Brown from Vancouver, who first curated Metcalfe's Laura. After meeting Lorna, I was fascinated and intrigued by the way she worked and thought, and I asked for her website. As I checked out her site, I found *The Extras* performance Brown had curated for the 2005 Live Biennial Festival in Vancouver."

It was the documentation of the Szupers' other performances that inspired Sereda to invite them to create a performance for Regina.

The Extras performance in Regina took place in the courtyard in front of Regina's City Hall, and revolved alternately around the action of a group of twenty three extras, two cameras, video footage of these and other extras at the locations of local film productions (*The Tommy Douglas Story* and *The Englishman's Boy*), and Sereda herself as she addressed a moving camera and read from a clipboard. The action began with a sort of controlled chaos as a team of extras spilled out of the foyer of City Hall, following



a video camera that tracked their movements, and finally followed by Sereda, and her authoritative prompt; “turn your camera on!” The camera that was trained on Sereda then started up, and her image was simulcast onto a large video screen in front of City Hall.

What followed was a kind of off-kilter, messy ballet, with seemingly confused extras being herded by the camera crews and Sereda. The action wasn’t always easy to follow, as there were different clusters of activity happening at the same time, but it was ultimately part of the design. All the while, Sereda read from a script-cum-manifesto that touched on such varied themes as citizenship, belonging, uranium mining, the roles of Native peoples in our culture, and political inaction. There was a “list of complaints” to do with city planning and services. Questions were raised, such as *Do We Work For Less Than Nothing? Are We Principled Characters? Are We Extras?* And the whole piece culminated with a woman singing *The Internationale* in front of a red curtain – precisely in front of

the odious “I (Heart) Regina” sign.

The site of City Hall certainly provided a context for the piece, and a broad metaphor as well.

“The City Hall location was deliberate”, Sereda explains. “When starting to collaborate with Susanne and Pavlo, one of the first email discussions we had was to look at architectural spaces that interested us on a performance level, a historical level, a social level, and a political level. *The Extras* performance takes the ‘action’ of the film shoot and the legacy of its industry as another ‘action’ to discuss the historical, social, and political nature of the site.”

“We were partly interested in City Hall, as it is an institutional, a government building”, Clausen adds. “This is bound to be a place of conflict and representation. We have





previously performed in different institutional or corporate buildings or locations, for example the stock exchange, and Bloomberg TV. We recently produced the *Liftarchiv*, a site-specific performative installation, where we build a large movable archive-container into the foyer of a central government office in Munich, and in which we performed a series of events.“

“In a way we began to understand our *Extras* piece as the ‘missing monument’ for Regina City Hall. Presently there are only two monuments - to Confucius and Gandhi.“

“We are interested to add new ideas or content to an existing institution.”

“Our works usually have no clear narrative”, Clausen explains. “Think of it as a set of sequences in rehearsal, or a number of scenes, as they are shot for a movie, which is not produced in sequential order. The rehearsal is perhaps also the metaphor, for our own art production. We are rehearsing the real event. The work itself and how it is made, is what constitutes an artwork for us. This perhaps is the classical Brechtian moment, it is always non-illusionary, the mode of production is always revealed.“

It is on this conceit that the piece’s success can be measured. *The Extras*, for all its proclamations of being about the role of the background performer, was actually about much more – but wasn’t really discussed in the piece expressly. Instead themes were referenced or alluded to, but not discussed or explored in any immediately satisfying or decipherable way. It was a meeting of formalist and practical concerns, but those concerns shifted with the passing of time. It was a process piece in the truest sense, and an irony, either intended or not, is that the background performers – so central to the interpretation of the piece, and despite a running proletariat theme - weren’t appraised of any overarching meaning at either the rehearsals nor at the performance itself.

Arnold McKenzie, who was one of the extras that night, was in the same boat as most extras on real film sets - unaware of what the script would contain, or where the story was headed. “There’s a veil there, and it’s not for me to know. I’m just working for scale. But it comes out, in the little bits - much like a surreal painting in some sense. You don’t really understand the intent of the artist until you aren’t looking at the painting any more, and some of these images come to mind and you start seeing these very odd juxtaposed images and ideas together, to form some sort of cohesive, understandable thing. And I think Michelle’s work is a lot like that anyway, which I appreciate. It’s not so straightforward, much like the surrealists. There’s something hidden, something underneath...”

“We made connections and references to moments in there, but also recognizable to earlier clichéd representation in Hollywood Westerns”, Clausen says. “We were looking to reference movies that were shot locally. We shot with extras at locations featured in *The Englishman’s Boy* – the Qu’Appelle Valley and Big Muddy.”

“One another note, with reference to this genre, it is interesting for us from a European perspective, that there is a contemporary fascination in central Europe with First Nations culture, most exemplified by the writings of Karl May, who in the late 19th century wrote fantastic novels about the wild west, without ever having traveled there. So for us, the those references really are a kind of Karl May meets *The Englishman’s Boy*, meets...?”

In the end, what the audience saw was a meditation, not so much on narrative, but on the process that makes some narratives possible.

“We are trying to find images, stories and theories to describe the phenomena and contradictions, which we perceive in our everyday life”, Clausen says.

“In *The Extras* performances, the audience becomes part of the performance itself. We don’t make participatory performances, but try to enable the viewer to reflect on their role and that of the performer in general. And to generate an awareness of the conditions of production that are at stake when art is made.”

“Our performances are experiments in communication, we are not trying to mystify but to put into question ideas, ways of performing.”

