

from war (he)art to war

Victor Jerrett Enns

(Editor's Note: this is an indepth exploration of *Dido and Aeneas*, presented by New Dance Horizons January 5, 1991 in Regina and January 19 & 20, 1991 in Montreal)

An introduction - the beginning

"In the beginning, there was chaos," is the first sound bite heard from a computer synthesized 'voice' in the dark. The sound environment builds to include a jumble of media clips from the weather (very cold in Regina, very hot in the Gulf) to the war (soon). In spotlight silhouette the shadow of the sword of Aeneas (represented by Benoît Lachambre) repeatedly thrust down into what we imagine to be the bodies of some of the less fortunate invading Greeks during the fall of Troy.

The six video monitors present the next image - the burning of the Penguin classic edition of *The Aeneid* (Virgil had wanted it burned just before his death) as the digital sign board on top of a monitor runs some lines selected from its pages. The performance revisions the myth of Dido and Aeneas from Books I to IV of *The Aeneid* and its appropriation, first by the Romans, and later by Western civilization as a justification for the rejection of love and of the feminine principle of nature in favour of duty, aggression and war to establish empire and as the foundation of the state.

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

This goal is achieved while maintaining a heightened consciousness of how art itself is an act of appropriation, and how art can be appropriated by dominant cultures. History may not be bunk, but it is usually written by or for the winners.

Virgil's text provides many of the visual images used in this production. This performance of Dido and Aeneas has a strong narrative impulse following the Virgil text quite closely, an echo of classical ballet structure.



1. INTEMPCO, 1991. *Dido and Aeneas*

This performance in some ways is a return to the origins of Western dance in the 17th century when themes were drawn from mythology, and dance was an element that presented the story in collaboration with music from composers of the time, backdrops by painters, and narrative provided by the writers of the period. From a theatrical perspective, this goes back even further to the ideal of Greek theatre, which is appropriate in the context of this work.

I think there is another exciting, fascinating, if a little far-fetched possibility worth examining here, about the development and creation of new artistic work on the prairies. Northrop Frye in *The*

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

Great Code refers to the possible sequence of modes or structures. Frye says that, according to Vito, "there are three ages in a cycle of history: a mythical age, or age of the gods; a heroic age, or an age of an aristocracy; and an age of the people, after which there comes a "ricorso" or return that starts the whole process over again. Each age produces its own kind of language, giving us three types of verbal expression that Vito calls, respectively, the poetic, the heroic, or noble, and the vulgar, and which I shall call the hieroglyphic, the heiratic, and the demotic."

I think this comment is appropriate, and not just to modes of writing. In this presentation of Dido and Aeneas I saw evidence of a turning of this wheel in Saskatchewan, from the vulgar or demotic (better known as the vernacular in Manitoba or the anecdotal in Saskatchewan) towards the poetic. Populist Saskatchewan has long been home to descriptive, realist art work, using the vernacular to advantage. I suspect, with some evidence from this work, that artists creating new work here now will turn and continue to return to the poetic and hieroglyphic phase, employing all the latest whizz-bang technology, but more importantly exploring and re-integrating the different art forms to do so.

This riveting and poetic performance also provides an excellent first entry or reading of the story of Dido and Aeneas. After I saw the production I wanted to read the text. This in itself is unusual. I do not readily or easily read texts written before the 20th century. As I read Virgil for the first time I was impressed with the

accuracy, integrity, richness, detail, and re-vision employed in setting this story in a contemporary context. I was also impressed with Virgil's facility for portraying explicit violence in vivid language. The performance enriched my first reading of *The Aeneid* and in turn illuminated the text with its contemporary and feminist revision. Those unfamiliar with the story, as I was, might benefit from a quick recap.

**The tragic tale of Dido and Aeneas:
a condensed version**

Aeneas, with the protection of his mother, Venus the goddess of love, escapes from Troy with his father and his son Ascanius, but losing his wife Creusa. The Gods have determined Aeneas is to be the ancestral father of Rome but not without a good deal of misfortune, hard sailing, hard work and heartbreak. Departing the falling city of Troy he runs into rough seas and heavy weather, stirred up by some of the gods thinking he was having too easy a time of it.

Finally, with his mother's intercession and protection, Aeneas is allowed to find shelter in a safe harbour. Venus appears in disguise to tell him he has landed on the African shore near Carthage where Dido is queen. Dido, she explains, had been forced to flee her home in Tyre when her brother Pygmalion killed her husband Sychaeus. She escaped with some subjects loyal to her and opposed to her brothers tyranny, taking some of the wealth of Tyre along with the fleet. She used these resources to buy land measured in bull-hide, and founded Carthage.

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

Aeneas is well received in Dido's court, and it's not long before he is asked to tell his tale at the banquet table. He tells the story of the Trojan horse, the fall of Troy, and his narrow escape in gory detail to a spellbound audience and an enchanted Dido. The following day Dido and Aeneas go hunting.

The conspiring gods create a severe thunderstorm, scattering the hunting party, but driving Dido and Aeneas into each others arms when they shelter in the same cave.

They make love, and Aeneas, to the chagrin of some of Dido's subjects, takes to her side and assists in the further development of Carthage. This idyll does not last long, for soon the gods visit Aeneas and tell him it's time for him to get on with his duty to found the new empire in Italy. Sheepishly he prepares his fleet for departure in the night, trying to avoid a confrontation with Dido. Dido catches him out anyway and, in one of the most moving speeches in classical literature, calls upon his love and love itself to hold him. Failing, she calls him traitor, and a coward for trying to steal away from her, and points out she has estranged herself from her people for this love that he is willing to give up so easily.

Aeneas, somewhat uneasily, returns to his fleet and goes to sleep on his high poop. As he sleeps he has a vision where Mercury tells him to hasten away. Instantly he wakes up the rest of his comrades and sets forth. Meanwhile, Dido has built a funeral pyre out of the relics of her relationship with Aeneas.

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

When she wakes up in the morning, she sees Aeneas sailing away. After another passionate speech she falls on the sword that Aeneas has, in his hurry, left behind. Dido's sister discovers her and admonishes her for not letting her share the same fate. Dutifully she carries her dying sister to the pyre and places her on the couch Dido once shared with Aeneas. Juno sends goddess Iris to release her spirit from her body into the wind. The unswerving Aeneas holds his course, but with many a backward glance at Carthage which is lit with the glare of Dido's funeral pyre.

A contemporary context

The NDH presentation of *Dido and Aeneas* was created in December and presented on the 5th of January, two weeks before the outbreak of the war in the Gulf. The performance, which includes video clips of the preparation of war was eerily prophetic.

Video images selected from the news push the myth being enacted by the live performers into contact and context with contemporary reality, tracing their lineage and responsibility back to Virgil. The clips of the Stealth war planes and tanks in the desert and the obvious near sexual excitement and anticipation surrounding their immanent deployment is used to illustrate how the media feeds off and adds to this myth. The video images appropriate the news to illustrate contemporary society's necrophiliac love affair with the precision and cleanliness of high tech violence as it builds society's idea of, and need and desire for, a certain kind of hero worship. No

surprise then that we are also given clips of James Bond in action from *Goldfinger*. Popular culture has also accepted, promulgated and capitalized on this myth.

The performance makes a moving, affective argument that this myth can be traced back at least as far as Virgil's attempt to please the Romans with his tale of Dido and Aeneas. Graphic violence, and highly eroticized depictions of love and death were turning on audiences a long way back.

The setting

The performance was presented in an old theatre at the University of Regina. The stage was mapped out to represent the region where the story is set, Greece, Carthage on the shores of Africa, Sicily and Italy. The set was minimalist in approach and provided maximum room for movement. Two columns made of string were hung from the rigging. Six video monitors, an electronic signboard and speakers provided the contemporary technology. The columns and the stylized wolf were created by artist Edward Poitras.

The performance

The stage is set for Dido as she appears with a cowhide over her shoulder which she places on the floor map. She traces out her territory, the territory of Carthage. Dido is portrayed with vigor, power, strength, dignity and sensuality throughout the performance by Davida Monk, a dancer and choreographer from Ottawa. Venus (convincingly portrayed by a statuesque Robin Poitras bound in

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

gold), balances the moon on her shoulder, walks across the ocean on wooden shoes, and carries Aeneas and his ship to a safe African harbour near Carthage. Disguising herself she appears to Aeneas on the shore and drops the moon into a copper bowl. Aeneas rolls the moon around in this bowl while engaging his disguised mother in an emotionally and sexually charged exchange communicated primarily with facial gestures - a combination of suckling and a chick being fed by its mother. We are shown Venus as mother, both vulnerable and manipulating, desiring to create a dependency in her son. Aeneas introjects the moon and leaves with Venus.



2. INTEMPCO, 1991. *Dido and Aeneas*

A pulsating industrial score, foregrounding the exceptional compositional talents of Don Stein, re-introduces Aeneas and future imperial Rome. Aeneas comes down to the stage through the audience, suckling from the wolf's teats. This is the signature image of the founding of Rome, appropriately realized by visual artist Edward Poitras of Regina. It foreshadows Romulus and Remus, Aeneas' grandchildren, understood to have been raised by wolves before founding Rome, which is named after Romulus. Throughout this piece, the wolf, represented by stylized legs, teats and an underbelly, represents the imperial principle, as well as the Roman empire. In this performance Aeneas is presented as

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

dependent on the wolf as well as his mother Venus, on both the imperial and the maternal principles.

Dido reappears to build Carthage out of Lego on a Monopoly Board, laid on the animal hide. A Trojan horse is visible and the allusion is further developed by text on the electronic sign board "FROM ART TO WAR." She rises to perform a beautiful solo featuring her well muscled arms and torso, with intricate hand movements to an Aria from Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*, whose words are "remember me, forget my fate, lay me down to earth." Video images show one gold finger sensually finger painting another finger gold. Aside from the sexual, this image points out the contaminating influence of gold and power required for empire building.

The middle

The performance's heightened sensuality breaks into open sexuality in the portrayal of the love of Dido and Aeneas at the heart of the performance. The air is filled with the aroma of spices, cooking in a pot on a hot plate at the side of a stage.

Aeneas turns from the wolf that has brought him to Carthage, and covering his face intermittently, frames just one eye with both hands as he approaches Dido. Stein's rhythmic percussive electronic score drives one of the dance highlights of the performance, a lover's *pas de deux*, that begins in a vigorous and athletic hunt. Drum beats and cymbals in repetitive patterns give

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

over to the tattoo beat on the floor by the boots of Dido & Aeneas, first apart and together as they join the hunt. The thunderstorm contrived by the gods is represented here by a media backwash, featuring war preparations and images of Mikel Gorbachev, and then George Bush with his wife getting out of a helicopter (reminding us of Nixon leaving in one not so long ago), as well as Saddam Hussein. Hiding their faces, framing one eye, Dido and Aeneas seek shelter in the cave. They embrace and Aeneas removes Dido's soft suede breastplate, raising her to shoulder height, and cups her breast.

The copper bowl hangs beside her, as they make love up against the wall of the cave, to the sounds of rain, and dripping water. The video updates the image by presenting the couple in the same pose in a shower, the woman raised, the man on his knees.

Dido returns to Carthage, as the audio presents a jumbled discussion by the artists of Dido's options and Dido's fate. As this scene fades Mercury intervenes. Portrayed by Quebec performance artist Richard Martel playing an electric guitar at ear-shattering volume, Mercury has been delegated by the gods to remind Aeneas of his duty. "GO TO ROME", is the text on the sign board. Dido stalks the stage crushing ceramic telephones, but is unable to reconnect with Aeneas and his god-driven date with destiny. Aeneas holds the phone in one hand and his ship in the other. The audio represents Dido's passionate speech disparaging Aeneas' cowardice in obeying the gods. Aeneas puts down the phone and suckles from the wolf.

Another contemporary context

There is another layer in this rich production, that of the relation of women and men, and each gender to power. The story could very easily be woman meets man, man meets woman, they "get" each other, woman loses man when man fails to connect to love, man continues his quest and builds an empire. This is another myth that has been appropriated by dominant cultures and is addressed directly by the artists in the creation of this piece. Dido and love are empowered, the loss is Aeneas'. Independence is valued, dependence is devalued.

The end

Dido's end is revisioned in this performance as she takes the sword, and instead of killing herself, attacks the symbol of the imperial state. Dido thrusts the sword down through the belly of the wolf, and slashes open each of the teats, which drain empty of salt. This is Dido's curse on Rome, which will turn against her. The poignancy of this scene is heightened by a reprise of the Purcell aria on the sound tape and with the signboard text which reads "wave against wave, race against race, arms against arms, house against house, book against book, art against art and heart against heart". Then one final image on the video - a heart in flames.

Epilogue

Across town at the Globe Theatre Billy Vickers is creating a Canadian hero in *BILLY BISHOP GOES TO WAR* written by John

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

Gray with Eric Peterson. Billy is another Aeneas, perhaps, except he returns to live with his Dido - Margaret. At the end of the play he sings this duet with the piano player (Rob Bryanton).

"Civilizations come and go (don't you know)

Dancing on to oblivion (oblivion)

The birth and death of nations,

Of Civilizations,

Can be viewed down the barrel of a gun.

Nobody knows who calls the tune

(calls the tune)

It's been on the Hit Parade for many years,

(can't you hear)

You and I must join the chorus,

Like ancestors before us,

And like them, we're going to disappear.

You're all invited to the Empire Soiree

We'll see each other there, just wait and see;

Attendance is required at the Empire Soiree.

We'll all dance the dance of history. "

In temporary company

I had the opportunity to talk to the artist/collaborators briefly over soup and salad before the photo call and dress rehearsal the day before the premiere of the work. It's plain the project was not

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

realized without some difficulty. Like the opening of the performance, in the beginning there was chaos.

Don Stein, the composer who created the soundscape for this piece, arrived at the Regina airport to find Daniel Levéillé, who was to be the central choreographer for this piece, leaving. Undaunted, after having a coffee and a discussion with Daniel, Don Stein joined the other artists. After an intense meeting to review various options and approaches the group decided the best course would be to continue.

"We fought like cats and dogs," said Robin Poitras. "Daniel's departure so early in the process meant we essentially had to start over from the beginning. It also meant that we needed to work more collectively, collaborate more closely."

"All of the contributing artists may have had particular responsibility in their area of expertise, but all of us in collaboration have affected each other," added Richard Martel.

Although credit for the work is given collectively to the artists brought together by INTEMPCO (short for "in temporary company"), the creation company of Regina's New Dance Horizons, it is possible to identify the on-stage performers as: Robin Poitras (Regina), producer, grant-writer, initiator, dancer, choreographer, who performed as Venus; Davida Monk (Ottawa), dancer, choreographer, performer, in the role of Dido; Benoît Lachambre (Montreal), dancer, choreographer, performer, as

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

Aeneas; and Richard Martel (Quebec City) a guitar-wielding performance and video artist, as Mercury. Richard also directed the video. Don Stein (Toronto, via Banff and the University of Alberta) was primarily responsible for creating the sound environment for the piece, and Edward Poitras (Regina) the visual environment.

These artists were brought together by Robin Poitras, one of the two artistic co-directors of Regina's New Dance Horizons. She initiated the work in response "to the one piece of literature that spoke to me when I was at university" she said, and "because I wanted to work with these artists. I've had good working experiences with them in the past, and I was looking for an opportunity to bring them together, and this was it. I was able to bring them together with the help of an Explorations grant from Canada Council, supplementing the funds New Dance Horizons was able to get for its regular operations from the Canada Council Independance program and money we receive from the Saskatchewan Arts Board. As a new company getting the money together to do anything takes a lot of the energy, usually taking it away from doing the work. We were extremely grateful for getting the support, and being able to tackle a project of this scope."

Robin and Edward Poitras spent an intensive period at Banff in the Inter-Arts program, and in the course of their multidisciplinary work, were in contact with Richard Martel and Don Stein. Performance festivals in Quebec have been another important source for Robin. Both Robin and Dianne Fraser, the co-director of

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

New Dance Horizons, have also made a point of seeing the work of other independent dance artists in Canada before bringing them to Regina.

David Monk has been traveling to Regina regularly for many years to teach dance intensive workshops, to perform, and work on choreography. David has spent some time in the Cypress Hills, staying and working at a vacation ranch southwest of Saskatchewan. She has been talking to the people responsible for Regina's Agribition, to see if she could set and perform a piece as part of the Rodeo. She cites the Saskatchewan "landscape and horizon as inspirational. Also, there is a feeling of greater freedom, more room to find a place for yourself."

Don Stein agreed, adding that in Regina, he sensed a "mystic energy with the land. Here you are located in your place; it seems a more grounded environment." The relationship between the place and the artists has been mutually beneficial as illustrated by the creation of new work like Dido and Aeneas.

from war (he)art to War

Victor Jerrett Enns

Victor Jerrett Enns is a writer and arts advocate living in Winnipeg. *Jimmy Bang Poems* was published by Turnstone Press in 1979, *Correct in this Culture* by Fifth House in 1985. He has since completed two as yet unpublished manuscripts, *Lucky Man* and *Involuntary Tongue*. His writing has appeared in *BorderCrossings*, *Grain* and *Prairie Fire*, and in the online magazine *RedNeck*. He is now working on another poetry collection, *The Jimmy Bang Blues Project*. One of the founders of the Manitoba Writer's Guild, he is also the founder of *Windscrip* (published by the Saskatchewan Writers Guild) and more recently *Rhubarb* magazine (published by the Mennonite Literary Society). He has been Executive Director of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, *Globe Theatre*, and the Manitoba Arts Council. He is currently Executive Director of the Winnipeg Film Group.

Photo Credit

1. *Dido & Aeneas*: 1991, Created in collaboration by: Benoît Lachambre, Davida Monk, Richard Martel, Edward Poitras, Robin Poitras and Don Stein, Performers: Benoît Lachambre and Davida Monk, Photographer: Don Hall.
2. *Dido & Aeneas*: 1991, Created in collaboration by: Benoît Lachambre, Davida Monk, Richard Martel, Edward Poitras, Robin Poitras and Don Stein, Performer: Robin Poitras, Photographer: Don Hall.