

# INVISIBLE CEREMONIES: A Personal Response

Sharon Butala

I attended New Dance Horizons' "Invisible Ceremonies" the night of Good Friday, March 29th, 2002. I'd been looking forward to the program very much, because where I live I rarely see dance, and because I have always been interested in it and find modern dance programs exciting and beautiful, though often, also, pretty strange. And I was especially looking forward to this program because Davida Monk, an acquaintance, would be a guest dancer, and I had never seen her dance. I understood that the poet Robert Bringhurst would also be there, and although I had heard him read at least twenty years ago, and am reading his long book, *A Story As Sharp As A Knife*, a translation of and commentary on Haida myths (having just visited the Queen Charlotte Islands), I was less interested in his presence. It was dance I was looking forward to.

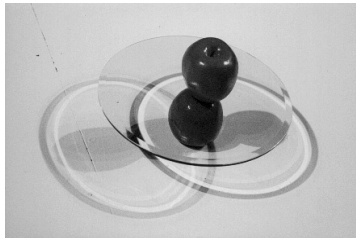
Ah! Talk about mis-communication: I had read the publicity blurb and knew what it said - "a series of performance and installation works" – but despite this, I'd foolishly focused on the name: New Dance Horizons, and the fact that Davida Monk and Robin Poitras are dancers, and despite having been told differently, I was still expecting to see the graceful leaps, the wonderful stretches by long-legged dancers, the satisfyingly queer and beautiful shapes modern dancers make separately and together with their bodies, both in motion and in stillness.

The hall was very dimly lit, there were no chairs for the audience to sit on, there were installations here and there throughout the large, rectangular

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space, and the first one I saw consisted of clay telephone receivers hanging from the ceiling, many of them broken into shards lying on marble sheets on the floor, and I thought at once, Oh, broken communication. Further on a number of what I thought were old drive-in movie speakers hung from the ceiling. I wasn't quite sure that's what they were, but they had the evenly spaced small openings of a microphone or an intercom on them and I was happy to let them go as part of the communication theme I was already, not quite consciously, and whether right or not, beginning to think I recognized. At intervals around the room's perimeter there were further installations or spots that had been marked out either by shapes of different flooring lying on the carpet or by what appeared to be minimal 'sets.' In a couple of places yellow spotlights were attached to the floor.



1. Robin Poitras, 2001. *memex ovum*

We milled around, fifty or sixty of us, including some very young children, trying to find a place to stand or sit from which to watch whatever was going to happen. Dancers - I should say 'performers' - were already among us doing strange things, one swathed in fabric, holding a flashlight, and moving back and forth slowly over a few feet (she was on wheels), one lying high above us at the top of one of the fat structural pillars, another lying on her back on a wheeled pallet and pushing herself around very slowly. All this while perhaps three different performers in spotlights stared blankly into space while they recited slowly, in unison,

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the same number sequence.



2. Robin Poitras, 2000. *Ursa Major*

Eventually the lights dimmed and then came up again - I cannot remember how this began - on the world premiere of the "Ursa Major," a performance piece with text from Robert Bringhurst, who also performed in it. This was followed by a further five short pieces with fewer people involved in them. The most elaborate actual dance was done by the non-dancer, Floyd Favel Starr, whose good humour and sense of fun permeated his piece. In fact, afterward, it struck me that other than in the "Ursa Major" piece, there'd been a sense of fun present all through the evening. The audience learned as the evening progressed that wherever bright lights came on would be the place where the next piece would be performed and would quickly move there. This was difficult. Nobody could be sure if the performers would move from that spot, or stay there, and all were concerned not to block the view of the person behind them and tried, considerately, to sit down if they were fortunate enough to be in the front of the crowd. Nonetheless, there was no way everyone could see everything, as in a conventional theatre. Consequently, during every piece there was audience shifting of positions and movement. About half-way through the evening my right hip, which will eventually require replacement I suppose, my knees, which have never functioned quite

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properly, and my back, which is merely getting to be an old back, had all begun to hurt from the constant standing up and sitting down on the rather hard floor, and the kneeling and twisting to try to see. As the evening moved on, this discomfort and the resulting exhaustion I was beginning to feel - I'd driven four hours that afternoon, too - moved into the forefront, eventually holding my attention about equally with the performers, and toward the end, taking precedence. By the last piece, "6/49", I was hurting too much and was too tired to be interested any more in what was going on. This strikes me as a not inconsiderable problem for New Dance Horizons. Maybe the organization should include in its advertising that people over sixty should probably stay home.

Other than "Ursa Major," the opening composition, what struck me most about the various performance pieces was that each had instances of such extreme visual beauty that these moments were at least unforgettable, regardless of how puzzling the content of the pieces. Some of these moments were: the silky glitter of the honey on the wall and on Robin Poitras's face and hair in "honeyworks #3"; the four symbolic curved and slanted black stands ending in red apples that represented microphones in "Bite Me"; a bare-legged and barefoot woman in an apple-green dress holding in each hand a small, brilliantly scarlet flower; dancer Davida Monk in her sculptured black gown holding in each cupped palm a large crystal.

I didn't concern myself at the time with meaning, as everything was happening too fast and was so striking visually that merely looking was about all I could manage. Performance art, as I understand the term, is art with a message, but I still find myself not terribly interested in trying to

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figure out what the individual messages were - the evening was called "Invisible Ceremonies" and indeed, they were invisible to me. Not that this bothers me; I was content with what I saw and heard in the five short pieces and didn't feel a need to deconstruct them for some abstruse meaning.

If there was anything I didn't like (no equivocation here) it was the "6/49" piece performed by "49 Dwarfs" -- 49 perhaps foot-high, identical white clay sculptures. The piece ended with 6 of them being smashed. I feel a little uncomfortable contributing to the political-correctness-police vision of the world, but one of my vast number of cousins is a dwarf; he has not had an easy time of it, I am sure, despite tremendous courage and self-awareness, and I do not think he would find "49 Dwarfs" amusing. Change them to bullfrogs, or blobs, is my advice.

"Ursa Major" was the centrepiece of the evening, the longest, the most elaborate. Four languages were used: Cree, English, Greek and Latin, which in retrospect, it seemed to me, made the piece part of the communication/mis-communication theme I thought I'd detected. It was a translation of and a mixture of - I think - various versions of the legend(s) that placed the constellation Ursa Major (Great Bear, Ursa being the feminine form) in the sky. At first I was baffled by the performer-on-pallet, then annoyed, as I had to move out of her way more than once, but finally comprehension broke into dumbitude and I realized she was a star or a constellation orbiting slowly through the sky.

All of this took place in dim light, using spotlights, and all motion was extremely slow, as one sees from earth celestial bodies moving.

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(Although, in fact, I think they actually zing around outer space at quite an amazing speed). I missed most of the story, hearing only the first part recited by Davida Monk, but it seemed to be enough that the rest (in three languages I don't read, write or speak) acted for me simply as a background musical score might. (I think I 'tuned out' the Latin and Greek, but enjoyed listening to Floyd Favel Starr in his soft, gentle voice, reading the Cree version). All of the performers moved beautifully, in the slowest, controlled turning and twisting.



3. Robin Poitras, 2001. *memex ovum*

Davida Monk was Hera, the betrayed wife who takes vengeance on Callisto, played by Robin Poitras, who has given birth to Hera's husband's child. Monk is striking-looking, tall, with a head of nearly-uncontrollable thick, curly hair, with the perfect unconventional beauty for the part she played and clad in one of the few garments that seemed designed and theatrical and entirely appropriate to, in fact enhanced, her appearance and her movement as a betrayed goddess, powerful, implacable and yet sorrowful. Behind her, on a structure looking like a mountain-climbing practice wall, Robin Poitras (wearing a bearskin) as Ursa Major, put there by Hera, writhed slowly, and turned around the yellow sky. In fact, I saw in a whole way, at last, that we were watching the sky and hearing the story of the objects in the sky. It was a genuinely stunning vision that was executed beautifully by the performers, with Robert Bringhurst reciting his text in his wonderful resonant, deep voice while taking part in the movement.

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It was a work of art, and a joy to watch and to listen to. My only wish was that it had been staged in the Globe Theatre downstairs, where I might have sat comfortably and seen all of it. But the idea of having the dancers and audience move in and around each other so that the audience participated inside the artwork was interesting and freeing. I might have wished for comfortable seats and would have given plenty for an unrestricted view, but Poitras is right: It wouldn't have been the same experience. How often does a patron of the arts actually get right inside an artist's vision?

As I lay in bed later that night thinking about what I had seen, I finally put my mental finger on something I'd been peripherally aware of for a long time: Somehow, whenever I'm dealing with this kind of art – something new to me, something strange that doesn't comply with my old-fashioned ideas about what constitutes the visual arts - is how some feature of the performance will be so striking to me, so right, and thus so wonderfully satisfying that no matter how baffled I am otherwise, or irritated, that moment of perfection makes up for the bewilderment or distaste, and I cannot stop myself from staring and staring, in order to get my fill of this perfect small thing. It seems to me, I finally thought, that it is as if all the rest of us (the viewers of these pieces) have had for a long time a sense of this particularity, but that it floats around inside us, inchoate, existing only as an undifferentiated impulse or longing, never brought to full consciousness. And then, there it is in front of us. An artist has felt that same inchoate desire, and has worked with it, and has finally succeeded in actualising it. And then the viewer looks at this 'reality' and sighs with pleasure, knowing it is exactly right.

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(Editor's Note: The "49 dwarfs" came from Robin Poitras' Snow White-inspired piece entitled "memex ovum" - these objects were a specific reference to the fairy tale).

Sharon Butala is the author of several books, including the award-winning bestseller *The Perfection of the Morning*. Her most recent books are *Wild Stone Heart: An Apprentice in the Fields*, a work of non-fiction, and the soon to be released *Real Life*, a collection of short stories, and *Old Man on His Back*, a collaboration with photographer Courtney Milne. She has lived for the past twenty-six years in the countryside near Eastend, Saskatchewan, where she is currently working on a novel, her seventh.

### Photo Credits

1. *memex ovum*: 2001, Choreography: Robin Poitras, Photographer: Gerald Saul.
2. *Ursa Major*: 2001, Choreography: Robin Poitras, Installation: John Noestheden, Performer: Robin Poitras, Photographer: John Noestheden.
3. *memex ovum*: 2001, Choreography: Robin Poitras, Performer: Chiyoko Szlavnic, Photographer: Gerald Saul.