

Welcome Back, Buffalo Bill Interviews

Heather Elton

(Editor's Note: *Welcome Back, Buffalo Bill* was co-directed and co-choreographed by Toronto-based dance artist Bill Coleman and North American powwow legend Boye Ladd. It was a New Dance Horizons INTEMPCO project, 1996/97).

Heather Elton interviews dancer/choreographers Boye Ladd and Bill Coleman, musician Edmund Bull and visual artist Edward Poitras.

Boye Ladd

HE: Can you tell me a bit about your history with wild west shows?

BL: I was part of the original cast of the *Standing Rock Indian Ceremonial show* that was created in the early 30s in Wisconsin. It was a major production, pretty famous. A lot of the material for that show was a reflection of the Hollywood concept of a romanticised Indian, and some was derived from the wild west show of Buffalo Bill. I performed with the show in the late 50s. I was the baby of the group, only 10 years old.

HE: You've heard about in Germany today, where there are huge celebrations with people dressing up for weeks at a time and having huge powwows. Have you been to any of those?

BL: Yes, I've been to some in the winter, because summer is usually

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when I'm competing on the powwow circuit. I have met a lot of European Indians there, people who are really into it, wannabes. Their outfits, costumes, regalia were some of the best I've ever seen, probably because they have made a science out of studying native beadwork and native design.



1. INTEMPCO, 1996
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He: Replicas?

BL: No, authentic stuff, items that were collected from the original wild west shows that toured Europe. The early audiences wanted the old stereotype of the "authentic Indian" chasing a stagecoach or covered wagon. These shows had a lot of fighting scenes, little skits, people falling off horses and eventually dancing.

HE: What did Sitting Bull do?

BL: He rode in carrying a staff. He led warriors in a recreation of Little Big Horn. From there, it was a celebration, there were dances. In the late 1800s, dance was no where near what it is today, with the costuming and the footwork. Back then it was a very basic one-two step. And there was just the basic apron, and moccasins and bells, not the fancy feather work we have today.

HE: So after the wild west shows, and before Standing Rock, what was there?

BL: There was limited dance. From 1900 to 1950, North American

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governments essentially banned Indian dance and religion and ceremony, so when there were dances, it had to be very isolated and small. The Indians didn't want the government agents to know about it because they feared rations would be cut or land taken away. Out of that was born a social type of dance, imitations of white man dances, round dances where men and women could dance together, because prior to that women were never allowed in the dance arena which was, historically, a warrior's circle. Powwow is essentially a respect for the warrior. Everything we do in dance today reflects the warriors and what they've seen in battle.

He: What kind of dance do you do?

BL: Fancy dance. It comes from the wild west shows, not really from any one tribe or region. If you understand the history, what happened to the people as they moved, the dance moved, too - it's the same kind of change and movement. And then a powwow champion travels the country and creates change. People see something they like in the dancer's actions or in his outfits and then more change is created. Interpretation with the spirit of originality. I've seen dance where some of the big time world champions still possess that spirit of originality - creativeness, interpretation, instead of exactly copying somebody else. You know a true champion by how he conducts himself, how he moves, how he dances. His footwork will almost tell you immediately what his power is-his source, his originality.

Bill Coleman

HE: You said that you don't collaborate much.

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BC: Not really, not unless it's interesting, like this project. It was good, and worked out well.

HE: Did you and Boye meet and decide on a total structure?

BC: Yeah, we were working within certain parameters. And others in the piece, too, would bring ideas by looking at what we were doing and responding. In some ways it does seem fairly segregated, with the natives having their themes and the cowboys having their themes, and yet there is an exploration of both elements going on at the same time. Physically there is integration. My motivation was to dance, and specifically to dance with Boye.

HE: Your whole movement is really hilarious, rhythmic and comic. It's lots of fun.

BC: Yes, it's interesting, and you know, the humour derived from Boye as much as from me. The funny bits are a big part of native culture, and they're human, too.

HE: It's curious, because you start watching the show and you think you're getting a serious history lesson and then all of a sudden it's really funny. I get a little nervous laughing at Indian car jokes, for instance, and yet when they are telling or laughing at those jokes, it's a totally different context.

BC: Right. That's Boye. He does those things, he is always putting

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things into context. And funny is funny, or if something is stupid, it's stupid.

HE: Did you look to cartoons for inspiration for the cowboy choreography?

BC: No, but I listened to a guy called Carl Stollins who did all the *Merry Melodies*. And I looked at old movies.

HE: Tell me more about wild west shows.

BC: They were like a circus, in a big arena where things happen simultaneously. Sometimes they were in a big tent, and sometimes just outside. The framework for our performance came out of that.

HE: The Regina audience: this worked really well for them, seeing as it was such a mixed group. In Toronto, it might have had a different construction.

BC: I just came to do it here. I couldn't imagine it being done anywhere else.

Edmund Bull

HE: How was this project for you?

EB: A really good experience, something I've never done before, in terms of collaboration.

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HE: You said you started singing and drumming with your dad and uncles when you were 16, in their group the *Little Pine Singers* from Little Pine Reserve.

EB: My father still dances on the powwow circuit, men's traditional dance. He also still makes drums.

HE: And you are also a guitar player with a beautiful voice. Is there a difference in the way you approach your music with lyrics and guitar than with a drumming group?

EB: There is a big difference. Drumming and singing a powwow song is hard on the throat. But the lyrics and songs come to me in the same way, whether it's for drums or the guitar. My people say that songs are in the air and sometimes they'll just come to you. Songs were meant to be shared. When someone comes to ask if they can sing one of our songs, I'm glad and honoured.

Edward Poitras

HE: Tell me about the sets and costumes for *Welcome Back, Buffalo Bill*.

EP: The teepee, black grass and the blankets were traditional elements that Boye Ladd felt needed to be there. I was interested in the concept of the game board, and with the vinyl lettering of tribe names taped down on the floor. The game board emphasizes the competitive nature of powwow and the historical entertainment that was the wild west show. It is also a sort of structure for the way the performers move on the floor. It was important, too, that the whole setting, with the seating and

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the bleachers, become like an arena, like a wild west show, or resemble spaces, like community hockey arenas, where some contemporary powwows are held.

HE: What about the playing cards?

EP: The piece required images that could be carried around and the best way to do this was to reproduce them on playing cards to go with the game board concept.

HE: And the costumes?

EP: When I saw some of the choreography, the first thing I thought of was toys, the little plastic cowboys and Indians. This informed the fabric, namely vinyl and the bells for spurs, and the colours, lime green and brown. And the wooden Indian and foam headdress further emphasized the artificiality, the whole concept of play, the game.

Heather Elton lives in London, England where she works as a freelance writer/editor/photographer. She was the editor of *Dance Connection*, Canada's magazine for contemporary dance, and *Last Issue*, an interdisciplinary arts magazine. As Editor of the Banff Centre Press, she published *Chinook Winds*, a chapbook on contemporary Aboriginal dance, and *Why Are You Telling Me This?*, an anthology of creative non-fiction. More recently, "All in the Family," her memoir documentary on adoption, was aired on CBC Radio's *Ideas*.

Photo Credit

1. *Welcome Back Buffalo Bill*: 1996, Choreography: Bill Coleman and Boye Ladd, Performers: Boye Ladd and Bill Coleman, Photographer: Unknown.