

Legislative Theatre presentation to Vancouver City Council, May 6, 2004

By Carrie Gallant and David Diamond



Hello. I am David Diamond, the Artistic Director of Headlines Theatre. With me is Carrie Gallant, the legal consultant who has prepared the Legislative Theatre report that is before Council as a result of Practicing Democracy. It is wonderful to be here.

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes

We have 30 minutes to present. Last night when Carrie and I were rehearsing this we managed it in just under 31 minutes. Although we have a lot to get through, we can do this.

It feels important to present a short history of how it is we got here:

History

Legislative Theatre was done for the first time in Brazil when Augusto Boal, founder of the Theatre of the Oppressed was elected to the Legislature in the District of Rio de Janeiro. During his two year term of office, he and his group passed over 20 laws using this innovative form of participatory democracy.

We were very pleased last February 27, 2003, yes, it is over a year ago, when Vancouver City Council voted unanimously to do a Legislative Theatre experiment with Headlines, the first such process in North America. This is a historic moment.

Councilors David Cadman and Ellen Woodsworth met with Headlines' Staff and we worked out a short list of topics that would be relevant to Council in March of 2004. This list included looking at:

- the results of the cuts to welfare
- the interface between youth and police
- issues of seniors
- how a ward system would work

Headlines sent this list through its extensive community networks and asked the public to vote. Overwhelmingly the vote was that the project should look at the results of the cuts to welfare.



Photo: David Cooper

On February 1st, 2004, 30 people living those issues gathered in the Japanese Hall for an intense 6 day **THEATRE FOR LIVING** workshop. Then the cast, production team and I had almost 3 weeks to create a piece of theatre that reflected the reality of the living community. Everything in the play reflects people's real lives.

The play performed for 18 performances at the Japanese hall, Croatian Cultural Centre and St. James Community Square to very diverse audiences. We averaged

72% attendance, with 100 seats every night. We also did a live telecast on SHAW Community Television that reached, we estimate, another 5,000 people.

Carrie Gallant, our legal consultant, who will be presenting the recommendations in the report, gathered the desires of the interventions at the interactive Forum Theatre events and the telecast, (some of these by e-mail) and also the suggestions in discussions. She analyzed and collated these into the legislative report that is now in front of Council.

Six of the eleven Council members saw the live production. Last week we couriered a DVD of the live telecast to each of the five who did not. We did this because while the report is extensive it exists, as this project exists, inside the context of a live, creative and interactive cultural event. If you haven't had time to do so yet, please, find the time to view the telecast. Because of the time pressures of live TV this particular performance was somewhat rushed, and has less conversation with the audience in it, but it will give you a context from which to read the full report.

The full report contains over 90 policy recommendations, many of which are within the power of the City of Vancouver to bring into being. Some of the recommendations, in fact, support initiatives that are already before Council. Because of the length of the report, we are not going to present all of the recommendations this afternoon, but, rather have selected some from each category. The full report is available on our website for anyone who wants to read it.

www.headlinestheatre.com -- click through the hands and you will see Practicing Democracy (now in the past work section).



Photo: David Cooper¹

Also – Headlines Theatre has been a conduit in this project -- we have used the theatre to articulate a true voice of people living in poverty. The recommendations have been a response to the lives and the issues presented on the stage. While it has been necessary to sort through and interpret these suggestions in order to process them, we have tried to present the recommendations from the public in as pure a form as possible.

Before we get to the report I would like to call two of the cast members to the microphone, to make brief statements: **Theresa Myles** and **Sandra Pronteau**. (left and right in this photo)

Sandra spoke about her activism and conditions currently in the Downtown East Side. She mentioned that Single Occupancy Rooms still were fire hazards. She urged Council to listen to the report and then take action.



Photo: David Cooper

¹ Many of the photos of the play that David Cooper shot feature slide images (behind the actors) that were taken by Lincoln Clarkes.

Theresa spoke about her own experience of homelessness. She said that when you have no address, you become a criminal in others' eyes and are treated as such. She talked about how proud she is to have been a part of this project and also urged Council to Listen and then take action.

Housing

The largest section by far is the section on housing. It was also an issue for every character in the play. Nan, in her mid-seventies and Elaine, her grand-daughter – a laid off Ministry of Human Resources worker are both housed but in danger of losing their housing. Marty a heroin addict living on the edge, lives in an SRO. Trade and Angel live in a dumpster and Karla has no where; she is caught in the “shelter shuffle”.



Once again, the recommendations we are presenting are a portion of the full report. Carrie will be presenting the recommendations, which will also be on screen, and I will do the section introductions.

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes

A. Target Groups

- Provide shelter options for those who need to be housed separately (eg. Women), and for those who would benefit from mixed housing (eg. Couples and families)

B. Improve Accessibility:

- Mandate shelters to offer more flexible hours of operation
- Create and maintain a housing registry that will help link single mothers with seniors and others who are isolated – combining skills and resources can afford both better living accommodations and support
- Up to date information on shelters and services should be available 24 hours per day through drop-in centres or information kiosks
- Staff drop-in centers with volunteer residents experienced in homelessness;
- reinstate/expand Carnegie program involving street workers handing out information in the Downtown East Side (DTES)

C. Increase Availability:

(1) Emergency shelters

- Establish tent city as a legitimate, safe and ongoing place of shelter, accessible 24 hours per day, with facilities on-site or nearby;
- Use City owned buildings for emergency overflow housing
- Collaborate with churches that offer emergency shelter and support to synchronize efforts across the city;

(2) Temporary Shelters

- Convert the many abandoned buildings in the city to shelters (many examples were cited, including buildings at 1st and Terminal, an old welfare office, a Buddhist Temple in Jericho, etc.):
 - Create time limits on building vacancies – limit how long a building owner can maintain an empty building before it is assumed by the City for conversion to shelter accommodation;
- Relax zoning regulations to:
 - permit secondary suites in single family homes, with incentives to provide accommodation to homeless or low income tenants;
 - permit developers to build very small self-contained affordable units for private market;
 - permit single family homes, eg. oversized “Vancouver Specials”, to be divided and rented out as single rooms

(3) Transitional Housing

- Create phased housing plan for individuals who need support in basic living skills as well as shelter – well intentioned accommodations have been trashed and abused in the past (eg. VanCity Place for Youth). Supervision and life skills support, as well as involvement in development, construction or renovation of shelter (eg. Habitat for Humanity) can create commitment from residents to protect shelter, treat it and self with respect. Consider the experience of Covenant House and its Rights of Passage Programme for youth, and NOW Canada in Kelowna, which provides a graduated living program for sexually abused women.

Where does the money come from?

- Impose a development tax on builders who do not include affordable housing in their development plans, similar to a percentage of development costs relegated to public art and parks
- Establish a donation program for community members to make small and large donations to build new shelters
- Impose a “tourism tax” to provide funding for shelters and social housing - see San Francisco for example

D. Improve Management of Shelters and Housing:

- Involve homeless, former homeless in operation, design and development of shelters. Their knowledge and survival skills are valuable, and involvement raises self-esteem to enable their own movement to another stage. As well, other residents could access peer support.

E. Improve Public Service Treatment of Homeless:

- The homeless have a right to vote, but no address to enable enumeration. In order to facilitate their participation in the democratic process, establish a city address (eg. a box office number) that homeless individuals can use to become enumerated

Food

The vast majority of Vancouver residents purchase their food, either at grocers, or restaurants and cafeterias. Some grow some food in their gardens. We connect our supply of food to our supply of money, consciously or unconsciously.



Photo: Lincoln Clarkes

The desire underlying audience interventions in Practicing Democracy was that access to food – healthy food – is a right for all Vancouver residents. Many expressed outrage at the vast amount of

excess food, both raw and prepared, that is discarded every day in Vancouver, by grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, film catering crews, banquets, community events with catered food and meals. The sense of the majority in the audiences was that there is no shortage of food in Vancouver itself; the problem lies in distribution and access.

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes

We have heard many stories of people fighting over food in food line ups. Even if the excess supply of food can be redistributed to those in need, there is a strong desire that the food be in good condition.



B. Supply

- Collaborate with the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCHA) regarding the application of the *Health Act*, to the safe donation and distribution of excess food by restaurants, hotels, grocers and film production companies
- Lobby VCHA to relax health regulations to enable donations of excess perishable and prepared foods in a safe and healthy manner:
 - Excess could be donated to community kitchens - perishable food could be prepared in soups etc.; prepared foods could be served immediately
 - Collaborate with restaurants, hotels and grocers in developing policy and regulations that would allow donations and distribution of excess healthy prepared and perishable foods
- As part of new Food Policy, create a Planting Policy – on City owned property – boulevards, parks – plant fruit bearing trees that are accessible to all; change ornamental gardens to fruit and vegetables
- Collaborate with community organizations to combine work training with food growth, preparation and sharing. Example: UBC Learning Exchange in DTES links students in agricultural studies, who are learning about food growth and preparation, with DTES where the food is donated

C. Where does the money come from?

(1) Tax Revenue

- Create a tax on food waste for restaurants, grocers, etc. and channel funds to food programs and community kitchens;
- Create a tax on all take-out, disposable containers;
- Create tax incentives for restaurants and grocers to prepare, donate, deliver food, similar to tax incentives for developers

(2) Other Sources

- When negotiating with film producers, ensure contract mandates that catering donates excess food;
- Redirect funds collected from advertising on the banners for 2010 Olympics towards food distribution

Safety



When Vancouver residents were asked about safety and neighbourhood livability issues in a recent Mayor's forum that Headlines attended, a major area of concern was policing and enforcement; participants at the Mayor's Forum strongly supported increased police presence on the street, and recruitment of more officers. **In Practicing Democracy, a major area of concern was safety from the police.**

Photo: David Cooper

The scene in the play in which Karla is assaulted and robbed by Police Officers is based on many workshop participants' real life experiences. Another reason this made it into the play is that many of us, myself included, witnessed some police officers roughing up a young woman outside our rehearsal hall while we were in the community workshop. We believe strongly that our intervention saved this woman from treatment that was more severe than she was already receiving. We contacted

her lawyer and informed him that we would be willing to testify that she was assaulted by the Police Officers. Interestingly, shortly after informing the lawyer of this, the Police dropped all charges against her.



Photo: David Cooper

I feel it is important to tell you this, and the area I am going to launch into next, because the scene between Karla and the police in the play is actually very mild compared to what we know is happening in the streets. I want to lay out some examples from my own experiences:

Headlines has done previous projects that dealt with policing issues – it is a concern that keeps rising up in our community work: in 1999 our production, **Squeegee** dealt with brutal beatings of street youth by the police, long before the Stanley Park beatings made it front page news. In 2000, with Federal Department of Justice funds, we put cameras in the hands of young film-makers who documented instances of police brutality. We called the project Through a Clear Lens.

When you view the clips, which are available on our website in the past work section, you can see a youth who is offering absolutely no resistance to the officer who has already handcuffed him. The Officer smashes the youth's head against a pole, lays him down on the street on his stomach for many minutes and then releases him.

In another clip, also on our web site, five or six male officers strip a young woman from the waist up while she screams and tries to get away. One has to wonder what is it that she could have done to warrant this treatment.

It was a commonly held belief from workshop participants and audience members alike that one is not safe dealing with the police and that treatment by the Vancouver City Police depends on your income level. For instance, disorderly conduct by a poor person on Hastings Street will be treated very differently than disorderly conduct by a monied person on the Robson Stroll.

During interventions in the **Practicing Democracy** I would ask audience members how many knew that what they were seeing on stage was real? Always it was between 30 – 60% of the very diverse audience who raised their hands. Very often discussions led to some kind of regulatory body that had teeth and the political will to do something. When asked where this body should reside, audiences were adamant that it be a citizen body, outside the Police Force. The reflection of distrust of the Vancouver Police Force and cynicism regarding the effectiveness of the Vancouver Police Board was very evident from this diverse audience.

There was a strong desire expressed that the safest place a citizen should be able to be was in custody of the Police. As we see from these examples, and from the play it is not. There was an expectation expressed in many performances that the City of Vancouver (the Employer) do something about the conduct of the Police (Civic Employees).

A. Police

- Create greater accountability of police to Vancouver City Council
- Increase review and checks on police behaviour and culture, relations with homeless, sex trade workers and low-income residents
 - Create stronger whistle-blower protection and programs to encourage within the police force; provide more support for officers to come forward
 - Create stricter penalties within the police force for wrongdoing
 - Create a separate, external “watchdog” body to review police actions – police policing the police has no credibility – city needs to take a stronger role in ensuring this happens – external body should be comprised of diverse pool of residents
 - Create an Internal Affairs department for police
 - Create “Civilian Chaperones” for police
 - Create a storefront complaints process for residents, similar to an external ombuds-officer
 - Provide advocates for mistreated residents to go before independent Complaints board

- Create forums where residents can tell their stories on policing issues, similar to ward discussions
- Develop workshops for residents who observe police brutality: what to do, how to handle

B. Community Safety

- Strengthen community liaison with police
- Stop closures of community police offices
- Re-instate emergency phone booths that have been removed; despite the proliferation of cell phones, not every Vancouver resident has one
- Practicing Democracy should be a regular production and forum for discussion, creates a perpetual dialogue with community

Support



This is something of a catch-all section, covering support for various sectors of society, reflected by each of the characters in the play:

Photo: David Cooper

A. Seniors

(1) Connection

- Improve visiting and outreach services for seniors who are isolated, living alone, and/or with mobility issues
 - Outreach workers similar to street nurses, to visit seniors in isolation, provide emotional support, ensure medication taken appropriately;
 - Support creation of a volunteer organization with a mandate to visit and connect with isolated seniors, particularly those with mobility issues
- City Council could approach Telus to bridge the gap for isolated seniors on limited income by providing free or reasonably priced phone or cell phone plans geared to income;
- community improvement associations could be developed to create links among residents, particularly those in isolation
- Offer seniors and disabled year-long discounts at community recreation centers, rather than limited to one program per season



Photo: David Cooper

(2) Health Issues

- Encourage doctors to perform minimum number of pro bono hours, similar to law society's requirement for lawyers
- Collaborate with VCHA to increase visits from public health nurses could assist isolated seniors with proper ingestion of medication – daily, weekly
- Lobby provincial government to provide MSP coverage for access to alternative medicine

B. Women

There was congratulations to the City on its initiative on Daycare and a suggestion to:

- Support program for single mothers to share childcare



Photo: David Cooper

D. Sex Trade Workers



Photo: David Cooper

- Vancouver City Council could place a major emphasis on providing safety to women, become known as a safe city for women
- Proceed with development of policy regarding establishment of safe sex zones and houses; amend zoning regulations to allow safe sex houses run by women who understand what they are dealing with – see eg. Holland
- Fund PACE Society, help get women off the street and raise awareness
- Shelters and transition housing with programs specific to women in the sex trade, and preferably outside common sex trade neighbourhoods, away from pimps and potential abusers



The “Urban Bush” is a phrase coined during the creation of Practicing Democracy to describe that state that people enter who have, for various reasons, cut themselves off from services. In the Kootenays these people might move into the forest and live off the land. In a major city, they enter the “urban bush” – the land of back alleys and dumpsters.

Photo: David Cooper

Photo: David Cooper (and below)



E. Urban Bush Dwellers

- On-site visitations by outreach workers, street nurses, provide on-site medical assistance
- Provide and support advocacy to assist marginalized to find their way through bureaucratic hoops, such as income assistance applications.
- Develop a skills exchange program that legitimizes skills and strengths developed in surviving the

urban bush – provides opportunity for individual to contribute, building self-esteem, confidence and trust in others, and to learn from skills and strengths of others

F. Drug Addictions

- Proceed with the **Four Pillars** strategy, and in particular to create and make available more treatment programs
- Detox available on demand: requires more beds and programs
- Make medical heroin available²; legalize access – see eg. Netherlands

Money

Money, of course, is a key player in Practicing Democracy, and integral to the entire issue of creating safety in a world that has experienced years of funding cuts to social services and welfare.

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes



The play reaches the violent crisis point, the brutal beating of 73 year old Nan, after a frustrated search for twenty dollars – an easily obtainable sum of money to most Vancouver residents; a “mountain” to others.

Photo: David Cooper

A. Income Assistance:

- Facilitate ability of those without a fixed address to access welfare; provide city address or post office box number
- Take a leadership role in lobbying the BC and federal governments to:
 - Restore and increase income assistance levels in Vancouver to match high cost of living and market rents
 - Remove barriers that inhibit or penalize recipients from helping one another, sharing living accommodation

And finally, Employment and Job Creation, which we acknowledge is much more the realm of Provincial and Federal policies:

B. Employment, Job Creation

- Work with business sector to stimulate employment opportunities for individuals living in poverty
- Create work training programs for youth and adults to work with seniors and isolated individuals: provides training and develops employment opportunities in social services, home care, and supports seniors and the isolated
- Repeal anti-panning by-laws

² On March 15, 2004, the Development Permit Board of Vancouver City Council approved the development of the NAOMI Project, involving the clinical trial of medically prescribed heroin/methadone maintenance.



Photo: David Cooper

The ball is now in your court. Thank you for your commitment and innovative approach to participatory democracy.

Photo: Lincoln Clarkes



This has been a long journey from Feb. 27, 2003 to May 6, 2004. We have promised the many local organizations who partnered with us, the workshop participants and cast, the people who came to the live performances and viewed on television, in other words the thousands of people this project has touched, that **Practicing Democracy** will not be over until we hear back from Vancouver City Council with word of what has happened to the recommendations in the report.

After the presentation numerous Councilors spoke about the power of the live Forum events and also of the presentation in Council. They were struck by how much emotional resonance the presentation had, being, as it is, the voice of the people who both were workshop participants, cast and audience interveners.

Councilor Green asked questions about the fire hazard situation in rooming houses. There is supposed to be a law in place requiring sprinklers, but in this meeting a loophole in the law appeared that indicates that sprinklers are not necessary if there are two exits or depending on the height of the building. He asked City Staff for an immediate investigation into the matter.

Then a unanimous motion was passed that asked City Staff to start to process the over 90 recommendations in the report and not to wait until the list had been finished, but to bring recommendations back to Council as they are rising up. The motion also instructs City Staff to inform Headlines Theatre whenever this happens, so that we can keep our networks informed. Here is the Motion:

THAT the report *Practicing Democracy - A Legislative Theatre Project*", dated April 21, 2004, be referred to the City Manager for follow up; and

FURTHER THAT Headlines Theatre be informed when staff reports reflect recommendations from the report *Practicing Democracy - A Legislative Theatre Project*", dated April 21, 2004; and

FURTHER THAT a separate report be prepared by staff relating specifically to fire and safety issues for SROs city-wide; and

FURTHER THAT a brief accounting of all the recommendations and their status within the City be prepared and submitted to Council; and

FURTHER THAT reports be brought back to Council as they occur and a full accounting be completed within one year.

So.....we'll be in touch.