

## BACK to SOMALIA

By DAVE WHITFIELD

How timely. With Israel again on a war footing in the Middle East, and Canadian forces on the road, on the sharp end, in Afghanistan, One Yellow Rabbit is restaging *Somalia Yellow*. Written and directed by Blake Brooker, *Somalia Yellow* is based on the experiences and images of the last war artist to work in a war zone, Allan Harding MacKay.

In 1993, MacKay found himself in Somalia, with Canadian peacekeepers, under contract to the Department of National Defence to capture the lives and times of soldiers on film and video (to be painted at a later date). Canada's efforts in Somalia turned into a debacle when it was discovered that, among the white supremacists in the Airborne regiment, some had taken it upon themselves to torture and kill a Somali teen. Charged and imprisoned, a soldier tried to commit suicide.

MacKay arrived at the Canadian base (Belet Huen) days after the events. "Myself and other journalists who were there knew something was wrong, but it wasn't until I returned to Canada that I learned more about it. But it was all a very powerful experience. Nine years later, I'm still making works from the images and I'm still living with images created there."

Allan Harding MacKay, left, Denise Clarke and Michael Green in *Somalia Yellow*.



Some of those images MacKay collected as a video, which he showed to Rabbit Denise Clarke. "I gave a copy to Denise, just to see if she could advise me as to what to do with it. She told me she and the Rabbits wanted to do it. In 1998, it came together and was put on stage.

"When I lived in Calgary, I was a big fan of One Yellow Rabbit. Performance Theatre appeals to me and they've put me on stage as one element. The play is about my motivations and experiences. It's a very subjective look at something on the world stage. It's a factual, poetic documentary that deals with some really tough stuff - issues of racism, First Nations people in the military - and the Rabbits don't back down.

"Frankly, some of it I don't like to listen to. The language is strong, the emotion is strong, but it's all there and I think it says more than I would have ventured. But it's very much a Canadian story." Joining MacKay are Rabbits Clarke, Michael Green, Andy Curtis and Richard McDowell.

"It's quite transparent that I'm not an actor, but I'm on stage in my fatigues as things happen around me. The play looks at issues, at what we expect of our military, of what we expect of artists. It's interesting that they're re-staging it now, because I think a lot of people want our leadership to smarten up. Canada is now in a combat role - but there was no debate, the government just sent them.

"I think, after Sept. 11, we've all been terrorized into accepting this (sending troops to Afghanistan) as the thing to do."

According to MacKay, plans are in the works for OYR to take *Somalia Yellow* on the road to Prague, Budapest, Berlin and Glasgow.

*Somalia Yellow* runs April 9-27 at the Big Secret Theatre in the EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts.

## ARTS

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Sean Dinnie Photo

Allan Harding MacKay, left, Denise Clarke and Michael Green in *Somalia Yellow*.