

CLOSURE for a CANADIAN EXPERIENCE



SOMALIA YELLOW

part of

OYR's High Performance Rodeo

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Big Secret Theatre [TAC]

By Nikki Sheppy

The video begins with the sound of horns and voices. From a moving personnel carrier, the soldier observes a landscape of heat and desolation. The pace is aggressive and the feelings the scenes inspire, visceral.

It's the opening sequence of *Somalia Yellow*, a multimedia collaboration between video artist Allan Harding MacKay and Calgary theatre company One Yellow Rabbit.

A commissioned artist in Somalia in March 1993, MacKay was present when Corporal Clayton Matchee was released from custody where he had been held for the torture and murder of a Somali youth. Assigned to the airborne regiment, MacKay spent one week in the country documenting Somali life, Canadian humanitarian aid efforts and the beginnings of what turned into a harrowing national incident.

"I was an outsider coming into that context," he says. "In retrospect, I realized that every one in that compound knew that a Somali teenager had been tortured and killed just before I arrived.

Everyone had that knowledge. But I didn't have that knowledge. Not initially." Whatever MacKay had expected to see, it wasn't this.

Video production gives new dimensions to Somalia incident

In fact, after Matchee's release, he became very self-conscious about shooting images of the military.

"I remember when I took shots of the holding cell, I actually walked around the compound, making it appear that I was interested in a lot of things - when in actual fact what I was really trying to get was that holding cell."

Filming daily Somali life proved difficult for different reasons. "It has to do with the notion of permission - the permission to document others," he explains. "It was certainly something I became very sensitive to because I could see that the women turned away from the camera. There was that sense that I was intruding. In other cases, I was quite encouraged. In one small village the principal actually gave us a tour of the school because he felt those images might be helpful."

In staging *Somalia Yellow*, OYR put together a chorus of actors who invite Allan into the playing space to answer questions about his experience while the video rolls behind them. According to collaborator Denise Clarke, the purpose of the chorus is to throw focus onto the video vignettes.

"It's a meditation and contemplation of those images. People who've seen them find them quite hypnotic," Clarke says. To achieve this effect, MacKay revisited the raw footage using AV equipment at The Banff Centre, selected the whole images and segments he felt were interesting, and manipulated them.

"Some of them get slowed down. Some get speeded up. Some get colorized. I think people will find them very different from the usual media images."

Both MacKay and Clarke believe the show is a chance to glimpse another side of Somalia - the subjective impression of an artist who was there and saw the good and the bad. "It's a rare opportunity.. for those of us who tried to quickly turn from the news after the initial shock and horror. And then watching it turn into the kind of joke it did," says Clarke.

"Nothing was solved. No resolve came out of that situation. It was for many Canadians the quintessential Canadian experience. It was very depressing. This, to me, is not depressing. It offers a sense of closure."