

Artist explores link between art and war in *Somalia Yellow*

FACT MEETS POETIC FICTION

JENNIFER PARTRIDGE
Calgary Herald



Courtesy, Sean Dennie

Allan Harding MacKay, left, with One Yellow Rabbit ensemble members Michael Green and Andy Curtis.

Just hearing the word Somalia tends to evoke one of the Canadian military's most infamous acts in this East African country - that of the torture and death of a Somali teenager at the hands of Canadian soldiers. For artist Allan Harding MacKay, however, who was commissioned by the Canadian Air Forces Civilian Art Program to document the Canadian Forces' humanitarian efforts in the war-torn country, it took on a personal resonance. Unbeknownst to him, MacKay's arrival at the Belet Huen compound on March 18, 1993, coincided with the immediate aftermath of the death of 16-year-old Shidane Arone and the attempted suicide of Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee of the Canadian Airborne Regiment, accused of torturing and killing Arone.

While these catalytic events inform much of *Somalia Yellow*, it is MacKay's video footage, shot during his six-day visit to this troubled country, which sets the scene for One Yellow Rabbit's season-ender.

"As Canadians, we're very much informed by, in a sense, the scandal, the Somalian inquiry and the problems with the leadership in the military, but that was not my experience when I was in Somalia," says MacKay.

"I still felt I had to deal with, in a very true way, the original images that I had in the time I was there. "This performance, then, is a mix between fact and poetic fiction in a documentary kind of way."

First workshopped at OYWs High Performance Rodeo in 1998, this revised version of *Somalia Yellow* in collaboration with MacKay, opens tonight starring the OYR ensemble (Denise Clarke, Andy Curtis, Michael Green and Richard McDowell).

Showcasing a fatigue clad MacKay, silhouetted against a huge video screen depicting images of Somalian people and landscapes juxtaposed against the reality of military hardware, he is faced with a barrage of questions. Blake Brooker, who wrote and directed the hour-long performance, says the hot-seat format stemmed from an interest in the artists activities as opposed to an inquiry into the military.

"So you learn a little bit about the military-, you learn about art making-, you learn about war art." says Brooker. -Our hope is that, as audience members, you find a deeper level of understanding

Con't. ... FACT MEETS POETIC FICTION

PREVIEW

ONE YELLOW RABBIT
PERFORMANCE THEATRE
PRESENTS *SOMALIA YELLOW*,
FEATURING THE
VIDEO ART OF ALLAN
HARDING MACKAY,
PREVIEWING TONIGHT
AND RUNNING
THROUGH APRIL 27
AT THE BIG SECRET
THEATRE IN THE EPCOR
CENTRE FOR THE PER-
FORMING ARTS.
SHOWTIMES ARE 8 P.M.
TUESDAY THROUGH
SATURDAY WITH 3 PM &
MATINEES ON SUNDAYS

and appreciation for the complexities involved in the military's activities in Somalia."

"They basically kind of strip off the layers," admits MacKay. "Instead of creating a sensitive 'I'm the hero who's going off to East Africa~ there's the fact that I knew nothing about the country, its politics or even the military."

Somalia Yellow, which will tour to Prague, Glasgow, Berlin and Budapest this fall, also provides an unsettling look at contemporary Canadian military involvement, says Brooker.

The Canadian Army is still doing things elsewhere. And this does not have a stale date on it. "This is still about ourselves as citizens, what we expect from our military, what we hope from our military and what we hope for and wish from our artists."

"*Somalia Yellow* also talks about the unlikely correspondences between being a soldier and being an artist you think they're totally opposite, that they're not related.

"But, in fact, they are."