

APR 11 - APR 17 2002 VOL 7 NO 18

CALGARY'S NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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THE ART OF war

somalia yellow chronicles the atrocities
witnessed by canada's last war artist

— ARTIST ALLAN HARDING MacKAY AND ONE
YELLOW RABBIT'S MICHAEL GREEN

| STRAIGHT DOPE ON BESTIALITY | WASHBOARD HANK | ATANARJUAT'S NORTHERN VISIONS |

SOMALIA YELLOW DOCUMENTS WAR ATROCITIES

Edited reality offers a different version of events in Canadian military scandal

LACHLAN MACKINTOSH

Allan Harding MacKay is the last Canadian to go to war as an artist. Of course, the 1993 "humanitarian mission" to Somalia isn't often described as a war. Despite the killing of more than 1,000 Somalis by U.S. forces during the Orwellian-named "Operation Deliverance and Cordon," it is the torture and murder of a Somali teenager, and the subsequent Somalia Inquiry, which remains in the memory of many Canadians.

MacKay went to Somalia as part of the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program, following in the famed footsteps of A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley and Alex Colville, all artists who had documented wars under the same program. MacKay, however, went armed with more than sketchbook or canvas. He arrived in Belet Huen, Somalia with a camcorder. What MacKay didn't know was that the previous day Shidane Abukar Arone had been killed by Corporal Clayton Matchee, while in custody at the same Canadian compound where Arone's killing took place.

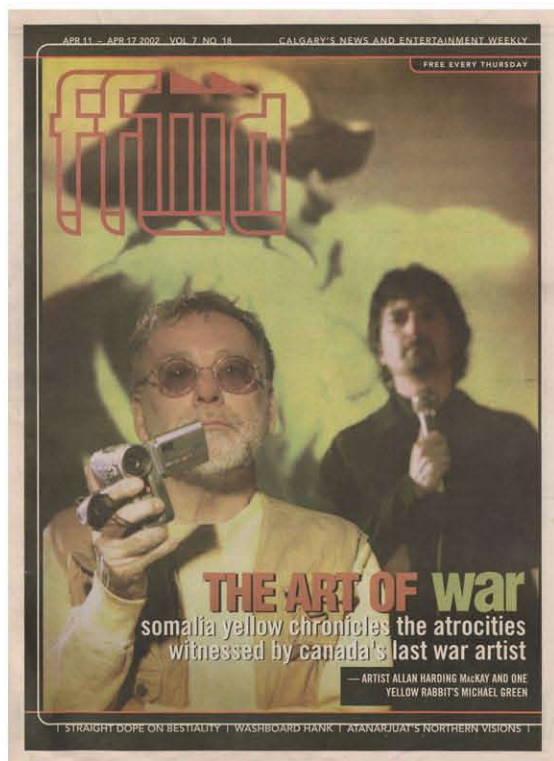
Writer and director Blake Brooker explains that One Yellow Rabbit's latest production, *Somalia Yellow*, is based on the raw footage MacKay shot in the days following Arone's death. Back in Canada, while an artist in residence at The Banff Centre, MacKay took this footage and manipulated it, altering speeds, colour and texture. He also made his 1993 journals available to Brooker, who then conducted a number of interviews with MacKay, creating a script he describes as "an edited reality."

THE INTERROGATIONS

What actually takes place onstage is a synthesis of MacKay's video art and the stylish performance theatre of One Yellow Rabbit. Staged as a series of interrogations with MacKay as the subject, *Somalia Yellow* becomes an artistic inquiry shadowing the official Somalia Inquiry

"It investigates what happens when a citizen bears witness," says Brooker. He then hints at other layers in the investigation by admitting, "There's no real map here - we begin with Allan (Harding MacKay) running away from a romantic entanglement."

Brooker drops this personal detail into the conversation, and it helps with a number of questions. What compels a person to go to a war zone? Once there, what was MacKay trying to do? And what is the artistic purpose of manipulating the raw footage that he captured?



THEATRE PREVIEW

SOMALIA YELLOW

One Yellow Rabbit

Runs until April 27

Big Secret Theatre [CPA]

EUROPE

Expanded from the workshop production seen at the 1998 High Performance Rodeo, *Somalia Yellow* is also being prepared for prospective productions in Prague, Berlin and Glasgow.

"In Europe there is a public appetite for theatre that investigates serious ideas," says Brooker. "Somalia Yellow is a rich mix, a nexus. One aspect is the culture of racism and brutality that surfaced in the Canadian military. Another is holding this quasi-mirror up to the artist and his role.... As Lord Beaverbrook put it, the war artist has a dual purpose. One is to provide a record of the country at war. The second is public relations. "

What MacKay recorded was the intimate detail of daily life for the Somali people, juxtaposed with the machinery of modern war. As for public relations, Canada's role as peacemakers will be forever tarnished by the violence of the Canadian military in Somalia. Yet PR is often fickle. A search of the Globe and Mail's Web site for Somalia turns up a currency exchange index, and nothing more.

VIA DOLOROSA

Brooker also wants to create a conflict of ideas. He mentions David Hare as an example of a playwright who succeeds in merging theatre with politics. Hare's 1998 monologue, *Via Dolorosa*, is a troublingly real examination of the Middle East conflict.

"Rarely do you have an artistic endeavour on such a purely political level," says BrookeL. Yet, what could be more political than MacKay's role in Somalia - that of being commissioned by the military to make art from war? And in a domino effect, through *Somalia Yellow*, perhaps Brooker and the OYR ensemble now enter into the realm of war artists, too.

Still, there has always been something mischievous about Brooker's writing, which has long been reflected in the company's work. So, when he paraphrases Michael Moore's gadfly admonition - "that the United States shouldn't be bombing any country that its people can't find on a map" - I wonder if Brooker's trademark humour will find a way into *Somalia Yellow*.

Brooker replies, "No, this is something else."



Synthesizing video art and performance theatre - One Yellow Rabbit's Michael Green (right) and artist Allan Harding MacKay.

[photo Jared Sych

COVER

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**THEATRE
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PHOTO: JAMES SYCH

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