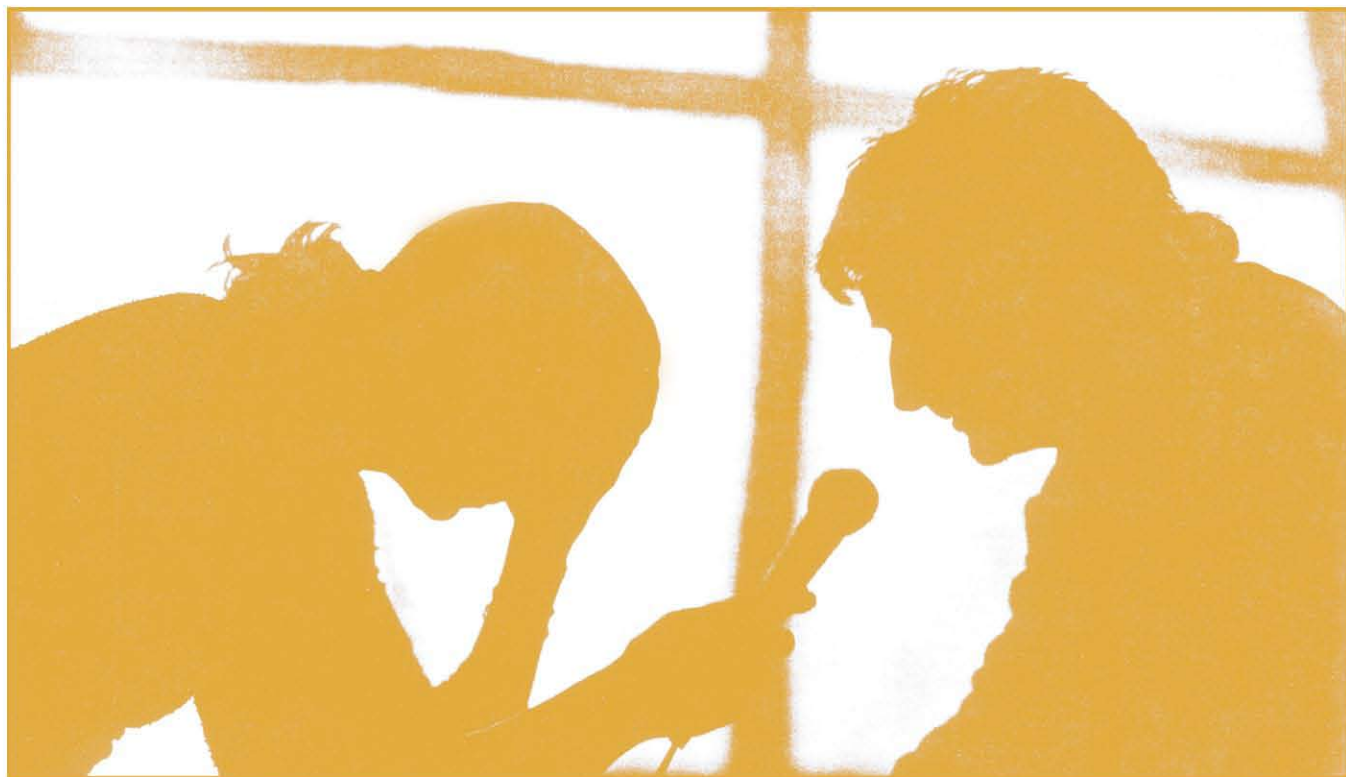


SOMALIA REVISITED



One Yellow Rabbit's Denise Clarke, left, and Michael Green. *Somalia Yellow's* question-and-answer formal was inspired by the federal inquiry that resulted from the Somalia killings.

One Yellow Rabbit theatre's timely remounting examines the role and behaviour of the Canadian Forces abroad

BY MARTIN MORROW, CALGARY

It was going to be "a ribald comedy," according to the season brochure." Then Sept. 11 happened. Now One Yellow Rabbit's final show this season is a much more sober affair - an examination of the Canadian military's troubled mission in Somalia, as seen through the eyes of civilian war artist Allan Harding MacKay.

Starting on Tuesday, the Calgary theatre company is presenting a revised version of *Somalia Yellow*, a production it first staged in 1998 as a collaboration with MacKay, who was in the East African country when the news broke about the torture and murder of a Somali teenager at the hands of Canadian soldiers.

"It's got so much resonance right now," said One Yellow Rabbit co-artistic director Michael Green, explaining the decision to revisit the play. "Our involvement in Afghanistan throws the Somalia experience into such sharp relief."

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It also looks like an obvious attempt to cash in on current events - not just the Afghanistan war, but also the release of Hollywood's take on the U.S. mission in Somalia, *Black Hawk Down*. However, Green won't take credit for such commercial savvy. He said *Somalia Yellow* might still be on the shelf if European impresarios hadn't taken an unexpected interest in it,

Last October, Green was attempting to set up a tour to Prague of one of the company's shows and getting nowhere. "We were trying to offer them *Doing Leonard Cohen or Mata Hari*, works that have been popular with North American presenters, but they didn't want those," he said. However, when he suggested *Somalia Yellow*, a lesser known item in the Rabbit repertoire, eyes lit up. "People were very interested in how tropical and how authentic it is he said. "especially when they found out the war artist himself is on stage with us." OneYellow Rabbit will tour the show in Prague's Four Days in Motion Festival and Glasgow's Tron Theatre this fall, with dates in Berlin and Budapest under negotiation.

To get it ready for the road, the company is remounting it in Calgary, where it previously had only a three-night run as part of the High Performance Rodeo. Unlike most Rabbit creations, which are flamboyantly physical, *Somalia Yellow* takes the form of a screening-cum-question-and-answer session. MacKay is put in the hot seat, while members of the troupe view his video art based on his Somalia trip and fire questions at him.

Blake Brooker, the show's writer and director, said the hot-seat format was inspired by the federal commission of inquiry that resulted from the Somalia killings. "We settled on the conceit that we'd hold an inquiry with an artist. We knew we weren't really qualified to talk about the subject from a military or political viewpoint. but we found that grilling Allan touched on those elements aired on other aspects of the case that hadn't been discussed.

MacKay, commissioned to document the Canadian Armed Forces' humanitarian efforts in the war and famine-wracked country, happened to arrive at the Belet Huen compound on March 18, 1993 - just 18 hours after (he then-unknown murder of 16-year-old Shidane Aitone. Shortly afterward, he recalls, he was attending a briefing "and this ambulance roared into the compound. About eight guys went into this holding cell and came out with someone on a stretcher." It was Master Corporal Clayton Matchee, one of Arone's torturers, who had attempted to hang himself. MacKay suddenly found himself caught up in an unfolding scandal, as journalists began to piece together the crime.

Since his method of creation involves working from videotape and photographs, MacKay ended up shooting footage of Matchee's cell as well as the original briefing on his aborted suicide by Lieutenant Colonel Carol Mathieu, the controversial commander of the Canadian Airborne Regiment who would later be court-martialed - and acquitted - twice.



Those segments form a part of *Somalia Yellow*, but MacKay's concerns were also esthetic, and he spent his six-day visit capturing all kinds of impressions. "There are also images of what I felt were very beautiful views of the Somali landscape," he said, "and the activities of the Somali people." Perhaps the most haunting vignette is a religious ritual in which some Somalis slit an animal's throat and bathe a young child in the blood. "It was this bloodbath of healing which was a complete contrast to the bloodbath of war."

During the show, the soft-spoken MacKay patiently fields pointed questions about this and his other choices of imagery from the Rabbits, as well as discussing the role of the artist in wartime. The performers -- Green, Denise Clarke and Andy Curtis - also embellish his story with their own responses, including an imagined monologue by the brain-damaged Matchee.

Brooker said he's revised his text based partly on the response to the first production. "People who served in Somalia came and saw the show and found us afterward and agreed to talk about it if we didn't identify them. That informed the kind of questions we're asking now." One key player in the affair who has followed both the show and MacKay's exhibits closely is Dr. Barry Armstrong, the former Army surgeon and whistle-blower. The veteran visual artist's *Somalia* series, also includes his commissioned drawings and collages, compiled shortly after his return home and now housed at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. He said the video component came almost as an afterthought, when he began going through all the footage he'd shot. "I was doing the project management for the Barnes Exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1994, so I had some money and with that, I self-produced the *Somalia Yellow* tape." MacKay thought the material needed a theatrical presentation, so he showed the 19-minute video to One Yellow Rabbit's Clarke at the suggestion of Calgary painter John Will. "As soon as Denise saw the images," Brooker said, "she knew she wanted to do something."

Currently a curator with the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Galley in Ontario, MacKay hopes the revival of *Somalia Yellow* will help stimulate the questions that nobody seems to be asking right now. "It's a reminder of some of the more troubling aspects of the use of the Canadian military," he said. "It's amazing how silent we've all been to the use of Canadian troop, in up-front combat in Afghanistan, because of the guilt and emotion of Sept. 11. I think the timing of this production is very appropriate."

One Yellow Rabbit's production of *Somalia Yellow* runs April 9-27 in the Big Secret Theatre at the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts in Calgary.