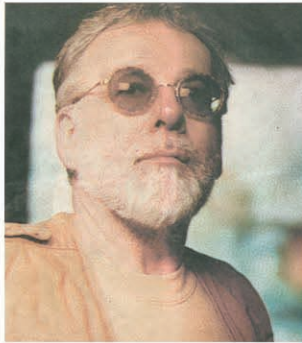


The ART of WAR

By Doug McIntyre.



Allan Harding MacKay

The role of artist as observer has a venerable tradition, particularly when the creative eye is cast over a social climate of tumult and upheaval.

"The artist is always considered a bit of an outsider in that his take is subjective," says Allan Harding MacKay, who was commissioned by the Canadian Armed Forces in 1993 to document the humanitarian intervention in Somalia.

"I think less in terms of political analysis," adds the 57-year-old Charlottetown native, renowned for his large-scale solitary figurative paintings.

"You must understand that I wasn't covering it as a journalist, but as an artist. I'm more of an observer of people's lives, whether it was the soldiers or the Somalis."

In *Somalia Yellow*, the latest introduction of the One Yellow Rabbit theatre company, a fatigue-clad MacKay stands before the searing video footage he shot as an official war artist and parries questions on the parallel roles of artist and soldier. Initially workshopped at the 1998 High Performance Rodeo, *Somalia Yellow* also features the OYR ensemble - including conceptual creator Denise Clarke - as MacKay's interrogators.

"It's basically an inquiry of my experience, which I describe in a factual and sometimes poetic way," says MacKay.

"I think in a sense it's more of an unofficial record," he adds.

"A lot of the vignettes are looking at the raw footage and choosing a moment, sometimes finding out how the observer is observed."

In March 1993, McKay was assigned to Belet Huen, a gunrunning, drug smuggling stop between Ethiopia and the lawless Somali capital of Mogadishu, where a campsite had been established for members of the Canadian peacekeeping contingent. He arrived only 18 hours after the beating death of Somali teenager Shidane Arone, a murder allegedly spearheaded by Master Corporal Clayton Matchee of the Canadian Airborne Regiment.

"We were sitting in the camp and an ambulance pulled up in front of the holding cell, which was actually a jail, and a body was put into the holding cell," recalls MacKay.

"Slowly the story started to be uncovered that a Somali youth had been captured in the compound and had been tortured and murdered chiefly by Matchee, who later attempted suicide."

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Within this atmosphere of bloodshed and burgeoning military controversy, MacKay rendered a series of sketches, prints, and video footage that brings a poetic aesthetic to everyday lives permeated by warfare.

MacKay discovered the Somali people to be resilient in the face of violent conflict, clinging to a semblance of routine while order collapsed all around them. One intriguing episode he witnessed was the bloodbath of healing –a traditional healing method to my understanding," he says - whereby a child was washed in the blood of slaughtered livestock.

"Here you have a context of people operating under hardship from both a war and an environmental point of view, as a drought had just happened," he says.

"They're living, and it's very emblematic of how heroic people can be under trying circumstances. This is of course linked with the good Canadian notion of helping, notwithstanding what happened in that compound."

The haunting images he captured continued to resonate with MacKay long after he left Somalia, ultimately culminating in his multimedia collaboration with One Yellow Rabbit. The artwork produced from his Somali odyssey has been widely featured in magazines and on television, and the stage accompaniment could potentially be Europe bound later this month.

"I was there for six days, shot an hour and a half of footage, and nine years later I'm still working on it," says MacKay.

"It seems to have some legs. I think it's the nature of our interest in conflict and in looking for some alternative to news journalism."

MacKay hopes Somalia Yellow will draw renewed attention to the famine and war-ravaged nation, despite the waning of its ongoing humanitarian crisis from the mass media radar.

"Look at how quickly Somalia was dropped off our screens after the U.S. pulled out (in late 1993) he says. "The only thing that's brought it back is the notion of terrorists being trained there.

"There's too much homogeneity in the mainstream media in terms of coverage," he adds. "Some of the salvation is that through alternate things like art and the Internet, other voices can be heard."

Somalia Yellow runs Apr. 9 to 27 at the Big Secret Theatre in the Epcor Centre for the Performing Arts. Opening week (April 9 to 14)