

Space and time churn beneath Toronto

By KAMAL AL-SOLAYLEE

UPDATED AT 9:13 AM EST

Thursday, Nov. 20, 2003

Something About a River

Created and performed by

Bluemouth Inc.: Stephen O'Connell,

Sabrina Reeves, Lucy Simic,

Richard Windeyer

Featuring Clara Adams, Chad Dembski, Kevin Reese-Cummings

At various locations in Toronto

Rating: ***1/2

You can interpret a dream, impose a narrative on an abstract painting, and turn the flow of a stream of consciousness into standard text. It's all in a critic's day job. But chances are you can't do all three simultaneously, not while attempting to comprehend your visceral responses from a barrage of sounds, images, performances and words. It's a critic's nightmare; it's a theatrical dream come true.

The company that's bringing me to my critical knees is Toronto's Bluemouth Inc. In one, five-hour evening, Bluemouth is remounting all three parts of its *Something About a River* trilogy, an environmentally staged elegy to a Toronto long dead if not quite completely buried. It's a marathon "performance installation" that requires physical and mental stamina -- and, over all, rewards them.

Something takes part in different venues and audiences are shuffled from one place to the next, and along the original river route, on a "magic" bus. The first part, *Fire Sermon*, unfolds at Metro XXX Theatre on Bloor Street West, a porno house. The second, *Death by Water*, is split between a funeral home on Queen Street West and the park opposite. The third, *What the Thunder Said*, is staged at a warehouse in Parkdale.

The river in the title is Garrison Creek, which lends the trilogy its physical topography and psychological metaphor. It once flowed through the western parts of Toronto and into Lake Ontario, but is now buried underneath the city -- although it has been known to erupt periodically.

This "what-lies-beneath" hook proves to be merely a starting point. Using physical movement, images and words, an epic family chronology of sorts emerges: a dead mother; abandoned children; hints of an incestuous relationship. The dots don't always connect coherently enough for my liking, but at some point in the evening I decided to flow along the river with the company and see what happens. It proved to be an excellent strategy.

The work evokes different moods and responses, and I'd be remiss if I were to divulge the details that inspire them. (I couldn't even if I tried in some cases.) The writing left me cold, but the images are by turns exquisite, frightening and hypnotic. Some are mere found footage, but their use within the performance space casts both the image and the space in new light -- let's just say a 1950s sausage-jumping-into-a-bun ad projected at a porn cinema is not cute and campy. Other images (a photo montage at the funeral home, a murder in the park, a final performance of a dirge) deal more explicitly and hauntingly with death.

What also holds the evening together are physically and emotionally intense performances from Bluemouth's acting cast (Sabrina Reeves, Lucy Simic and Stephen O'Connell) and guest artists (Clara Adams, Kevin Reese-Cummings and Chad Dembski). Richard Windeyer's sound design and Jud Martell and David Duclos's lighting design are essential to the experiential element (or is it elemental experience?) of the evening.

It's not a coincidence that the trilogy borrows its titles from the last three parts of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A quick read of the poem after the performance shows the roots of some of the "heap of broken images" used here. Like Eliot's poem, this 21st-century elegiac response is an attempt to reintegrate Toronto, a history-insensitive city, to mystic origins.

There is some fine-tuning to be done and logistics to be ironed out, but what the company is creating, on a shoestring budget, is on such a monumental level that these are more blemishes on a large canvas than serious caveats. And if "fear in a handful of dust" sounds tempting to you, do dress warmly for the occasion. It gets cold in that warehouse.

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