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Interviewer Maria Dunn

Q: Could you talk about the process that went into making the 1919 film and the AUPE project?

DB: To go back a bit, one of the first things I did when I got to Alberta back in 1997/'98 was to investigate the general strike in 1919. Coming out of Toronto, I'd done some work around the history of the formation of the Toronto Labour Council, which involved the Knights of Labour and Daniel O'Donoghue, which was one of the first examples of a broad based unionization effort that worked across disciplines and across different kinds of workers and different backgrounds for the workers. When I first arrived here, I had no idea that there was the level of activism that had existed at the same time as the 1919 strike. Eugene Plawiuk, who was a long time Edmonton historian and activist, had written some Internet materials about 1919. I was really intrigued by the degree to which the Knights of Labour and the Wobblies had some commonalities around them, and that it had a local connection to Edmonton. In fact, I ended up creating a kind of theatre piece based around that time, which we did as a kind of reading at Cabaret in the second May Week [*Festival*] that we put on in Edmonton. In the end, I wasn't very happy with the results of that. I kind of put it to one side and went on to other projects.

When people started talking about the 100th anniversary of the Winnipeg General Strike, it kind of came back to my mind. It's like, okay I think it's important to go back to 1919 and look at what had happened there; it's something I'm interested in re-examining. Then with ALHI, we made the commitment to engage in an educative process around the fact that most people don't understand that 1919 did not just exist in Winnipeg, but existed across the whole country. That's what ultimately the government and the corporate class were concerned about, and resulted in the

repressive putdown of the Winnipeg strike, as it was meant to serve as an example to everyone else in the country.

We started into a process. Two things were happening in parallel. The first was that it was also the 100th anniversary of the founding of AUPE, Alberta Union of Provincial Employees. For a number of years we'd been doing a theatre school, or, a course at their labour school on arts and labour. They, logically enough, chose 1919 as the departure point for the course in that year. So there was actually a really pragmatic context put in place around that. The second piece of it was that ALHI wanted to try and get out the message that there were other strikes going on and that Alberta and many other places in this country were not isolated from a general workers' revolt; it was a much bigger thing.

So as things moved forward, the first strategy was that. . . My focus in this kind of work is oral history, and that's kind of how I came to it out of a background in theatre and production of video through interviewing people and gathering stories. I'd learned in Edmonton through a number of projects about how that process could be made less wasteful. Often when you're working in documentary, for example, you'll do a massive amount of research, hours and hours of interviews, and then you come up with an hour or 90-minute film, and a huge amount of that material is kind of lost. Whether it's in theatre or in video, it always seemed to me that there was so much there that you end up not using, because your choices for the project are made by a certain set of parameters of the project - who it's intended for, who you're trying to focus your story on - and all kinds of other complex and really interesting detail and nuance disappears. I learned in working with historian Catherine Cole and our community based projects, to revise the way of looking at that - to look at the research process as an end in itself, in which the material would collect, be it photographs or written materials or the oral history interviews, becomes part of a big collection that then becomes a public resource. It goes to the archives and it becomes something that people can draw on in different ways and interpret in different ways. It's a matter of seeing the research and historical process as separate from the

interpretive process and the artistic process. Going into this again, I was really concerned that with 1919 we'd follow that kind of model, so that we were collecting a huge amount of material, disseminating it through ALHI and the website, and then turning my focus to a particular way into that material and a particular interpretive set of interpretive processes.

The question became, "oral history, how do we get it?" One of the reasons I put this project aside in the first place is I really felt like the characters that I was creating for the piece were not grounded in what reality might have been at that time, because I really was extrapolating in the dark. So that's what I started looking for - is there any kind of actual words, any kind of verbatim materials here? Fortunately, at an early meeting when we started talking about this, Alvin said, "ya there is this Mathers Commission report that went across the whole country collecting workers' stories at that time". Immediately I was like, "okay I need to read that material. I need to know what was said in Calgary and in Edmonton by the workers that came before that commission". And yes, I know it is a narrow spectrum, because it tended to be the established workers who were the "elite" of the working class at that point - the carpenters and the tradespeople. And there's relatively few women. But at least it's a point into the situation in people's own words. We managed, through some connections that Alvin had in Ottawa, to get a researcher in Ottawa to go into the National Archives and methodically, page by page, scan all of the testimony that was given by workers in Calgary and Edmonton, and reproduce it and send it to us. Again, this became a historical resource for ALHI but it also became the core of the work that we moved forward on. You actually had the ability to read, and the interviews were way richer than I thought they were going to be. There was, particularly in Calgary, two women, Jean McWilliam and Mrs. Corse, who both came and made really powerful statements before the commission.

That became a really important piece of the puzzle, coming back again to AUPE. The other thing that was framing it was that when we went into it with AUPE, any project I do, I'm looking for a way to connect the history and the stories to the contemporary

reality that people are dealing with. So with AUPE, the way that happened was that they, as part of their 100th anniversary, did a huge demographic survey of their membership and polled a large percentage of their members to try to find out who they were, where they're from, where they worked, what their issues were in their workplaces, what their feelings were about the government's relationship, and so on. Some really interesting stuff came out of that. Lindsay Ruth Hunt, who was the person at the AUPE education department that I was working with directly, came back and said, "okay here's some important information about both the people who are members and the themes that they've identified as important to them". What emerged was like a median member of AUPE these days is a woman in her 30s to 40s who is in the healthcare provision area and is more than likely not born in Canada and more than likely born in the Philippines. It became immediately apparent that the women's voices needed to be central. The majority of AUPE's members are women, so that had to be a lens through which we saw this material. Also, we had to look at immigration and the issues around immigration, which were really potent in that period of time. And we needed to look at healthcare. So there was a whole number of parameters that then helped me to choose the characters and the themes.

Thematically we ended up working in four areas. There was, in no particular order, healthcare, the issue of privatized healthcare. Of course, in 1919 it was, well "what is Medicare?" So we're more than 50 years before any form of Medicare. You had a highly privatized system, but frankly I didn't actually know how that worked. How did that play out? Part of the research was just finding out what happened if you got sick, and the fact that there were these separate wards in the hospital - the public wards and the private wards. In order to be able to serve their patients in the private wards, doctors had to put in x number of hours in the public wards. But it's like, okay, that's very much the bottom of the priority list. You saw how that played out in terms of them being absent from treatment, not engaged with treatment, handling too many people, etc. So that whole picture began to emerge around the hospital system.

The second area was pay equity and the differentiation in the treatment of women in the workplace in 1919, which was obviously significant. It's the same as it was after the end of the Second World War when my mother had to deal with the fact that soldiers coming back were given priority. Women in general, and particularly married women, were basically shoved out of all the positions they'd been holding. That was still happening at the end of the Second World War and was happening exactly in the First World War. With a few exceptions, women working in munitions in the First World War were pushed out. So, it became a way into looking at the issues of equality in the workplace between men and women.

Precarious employment - it's very interesting that we are returning to very near where employment is the gig economy, we call it now. It's very much the same kind of situation, that workers, even if they worked consistently in one workplace, like the Ogden shops in Calgary, the railway workers there, although you were expected to show up every morning and you worked there, they could tell you, "ya you work here but we don't have any work for you today, so you can just go back home now". The man has to take his tools and go home, and not get paid. There's an ongoing employment relationship expected from the employer, but they don't feel they have to honour that in terms of paying the employee on a day to day basis. That looks a whole lot like Starbucks today. There's a whole kind of way in which there's a parallel to that system that they were objecting to as part of the workers' revolt in 1919, which we've come to accept as a normative way of hiring people now. University lecturers - it's so much an inherent part of it. So again, we wanted to talk about that.

We wanted to talk about immigration and the fact that many of the same kinds of rhetoric were being used around taking away jobs, causing social problems, etc., that we hear across the country, and in the States, obviously and that was being put out at the same time in a more overt way, but the same basic principle is going on. I think those are the four I covered. So those became the framing device, and we started to evolve characters that would have biographies that reflected the history but also those themes: a worker at the Ogden yard around precarious employment, a nurse

dealing with the Spanish flu epidemic in Edmonton in terms of healthcare and the private healthcare sector, a telephone operator in Lethbridge, and then finally to workers in a meatpacking plant, one from Ukraine and one from China, who address issues around immigration. In addition, as we worked on this, the character based on Jean McWilliam's course came out to put the women's voice and a more politically radical woman's voice into the piece. Those became the characters.

Then the historical research, as it went forward, began to draw on those character thematic threads, which then echoed through in terms of Alvin used some of that material when he was writing a booklet for it, and we brought it into the AUPE school. At that school there's Maria Dunn, Patricia Darbasie, Bill Horne and Claire Kujundzic, who were offering interpretations. I pulled together character stories around those people and themes, and created essentially 15 or 20 minutes of video about each one of them that then became a source book so that participants in the course (15 or 20 participants) could look at, and respond to, to create a performance during the course. It works in two ways. The first is it basically disciplines you. You've got a time and a deadline where you have to actually have some of this material gathered for people to work with. Second, you get actual workers today and you're able to sense what they're responding to. They're talking all of this albeit filtered material, they're taking a big body of material and they're kind of like, "oh that story really connected for me". It's not intellectual resonance at that point, it moves it into a much broader and deeper resonance that that story is speaking across time to workers who are often in similar working situations here today in Alberta.

So that was kind of the first piece of it. Out of that, a number of things start to evolve. One was the half-hour video, which took those stories and brought them together. The second was Maria Dunn's song, that the Labour History Institute had commissioned; we started cross referencing this material into that song. The booklet, the panels, a lot of it drew into ALHI's ongoing commitment to oral history. Those oral histories that we were able to unearth became the grounding for all of the

storytelling that everybody was doing in the course of the last year. So that's basically the process.

Q: Now all of those materials are available for people.

DB: That's the objective. We've got all of the transcripts and videos online. You're working on the song, so that will become online. We're doing these interviews, so that will provide. . . Sorry, I should have said, we took the video and we showed it first of all at the Alberta Federation of Labour conference, and got the response there. In that conference you're looking for things. . .

Oh I should talk a bit about the process around the immigrant workers, because it's a crucial issue of representation. As a white male artist, there's a whole set of issues that lock into place that I have to respect. How do we ensure those voices have a level of authenticity to them? I was able to do the basic research and get a plausible character story for both of them, and a plausible kind of narrative that I could write in the same way I write any of the characters. But at that point, I needed to then turn it over to people from the communities. In one case, Winston Gereluk, who's writing the book on workers and Ukrainian history - I'm like, okay Winston, the objective is at the other end we need you to be able to read the voice the way it would've sounded in 1919 but that respects the history and story of the person. When you have language issues that the speaker is going to be grappling with, you want to reflect that reality but you want to make sure that the person behind the challenges they're facing around language is properly represented and does not come across as any kind of stereotype. So Winston did that work to create the material.

For the Chinese character, we worked through two layers, first through Bill Horne, through an interpreter in Barkerville, because in that historical site in B.C. you've got a parallel mining community and Chinese community on separate streets. The job of the interpreter there is to know that history and how the daily life would've happened on that street. So we thought that was a really good entry point. They hire

actors out of college and university programs to do that interpretive work, so you have somebody who is actually immersed in the day to day living history of the Chinese community in one of these centres, and also has some skills with working with character and acting. So they looked at this literal text, as it were, and started to say, “okay I think it should sound more like this”. Then, for a number of technical reasons, that person wasn’t actually able to record it. He said, okay but I know somebody in Vancouver. So we then went to Elwin [T Xie] in Vancouver. He’s a musician actor and also is one of the founding members of the Chinese historical group in Vancouver. So he was again able to look at it from a historical filter and as a performer, so he again tweaked the script a bit and then recorded it.

When we come to the Alberta Federation of Labour, long detour to there, one of the things that I was watching is there was in the crowd of workers a whole contingent from I think it was UFCW who were seated off to that side of the stage. I was watching them the whole time to try and gauge what their reaction to that character and that story would be, because in a lot of ways it was their own experience and history I was talking about. I made it really clear we were showing a working version, and if there were any issues, please come and talk to me and we would raise them. But more than that, I was looking at the instant response in watching. When the Chinese character talked and told a certain story and they all laughed, it was one of those laughs of recognition. You just go, okay, the process is working here. We’ve managed to get something that not only is not offensive in any way, but it also actually speaks to people now about their own stories.

Then we went with it to Winnipeg and showed it at the conference in Winnipeg, where you have another kind of feedback system where every major labour historian in the country gets to look at it and tell you any of the mistakes that you’ve still got in the video, in historical terms. We also did brief showings in Ottawa and Toronto, and again got feedback from different kinds of unionists in terms of how things resonated for them and the kind of, oh that was going on? There’s stuff outside of Winnipeg in Alberta? By the end of May I was, “okay we’re now at the point where we

can properly revise the text and the structure, and record the video and put it out for a tour in September across Lethbridge, Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton”. And it’s available online now. So that’s kind of the completion of the trajectory of the video piece of it.

Q: Were there any major changes that you felt you needed to make after the viewer feedback?

DB: We didn’t change any of the characters or themes. The response to the people and the themes was pretty gratifying that the process had got that right. Something was speaking to people, sometimes many topics were speaking to people. But there were things like Winston decided he’d made the Ukrainian accent too thick, so he wanted to pull that back a bit, and we tweaked a bit of the language and stuff around that. I did technical stuff around restructuring the sequence of the film, plus we were doing some cutting and changing as we went. But by and large, by that point it was a refinement process.

Q: I’m interested in how aware and sensitive you are to the whole representation issues and the process around how you involve other people to the point where you feel that is not an exploitive representation of anyone. Is that something you learned gradually over the years, or was there a more formal learning or awareness process?

DB: It was an informal process but it started with working with the Filipino community in Toronto. Shortly after I moved to Toronto, Theatre Ontario had this thing where professional directors would go in and work with community groups, be paid to go in and work with a community based theatre group. A lot of that involves going out and doing plays in little theatres, which is not really my interest. But then this group came forward of people from the Philippines who wanted to tell the story about immigrating to Canada. I said, okay, that could be really interesting. I met with these people and was just blown away. They were part of a group called CAMD, the Coalition Against the Marcos Dictatorship. Most of them had left the Philippines when

martial law was declared in the Philippines, and were basically political people who'd been forced into exile. They had kind of formed a collective working group, and they had collectively written this play about their experience. They were a very strong group of people who were like saw no contradiction going to a Marxist study group one night and the next night going to the cathedral to light candles. They really had a very complicated and nuanced understanding of spiritual life, culture, and historical political stuff. The story they were telling was at that point - this is 1983/'84 in Toronto - about coming here and the level of qualification they had to have to come to Canada, then to discover that when they come here their engineering degrees or nursing degrees or whatever are not acknowledged, and they're cleaning toilets. That was essentially the story they were trying to represent on the stage. That was one where I learned so much more than they did out of the process just by the way in which they operated with each other, the way they were collectively writing things, collective making decisions around their organization, and telling their own story. It carried a power and an authenticity that was absolutely ground-breaking in the Toronto theatre at that point. You had people from Latin American communities, from the Black communities, all coming to the show. It was like, "ya okay, that happened to us too". I really learned a lot about the need for it to be authentic. The story had to be told by the people whose story it was, ultimately. There's a way in which I can help that process. I have certain technical skills and dramaturgy and directing and acting and all those kinds of things that can assist that process, but ultimately it's that story. Flash forward through 30 odd years, we're at a stage now where people at least acknowledge the necessity of that. The other piece of the process is that the whole crew of them saw this as an adjunct to their political work. The political work was against the Marcos dictatorship. They would have community picnics every year in June and they would put on skits, and this is what came out of it. They would do skits at these community picnics every year and then they eventually said, "we want to do a whole play". It was such direct and immediate contact with the community. It's educative work, and it's not educative in the traditional sense of, "I'm going to lecture you and tell you stuff". It's educative in the Popular Education sense of, I'm going to share stories with you that we can all learn by. That whole process dovetailed

with another process where I was doing video work with unions and learning Popular Education work through Darcy Martin and people in the labour movement. It was also connected to my work at the Development Education Centre. At that stage in Toronto, the entire Popular Education movement that was going on in Nicaragua and throughout Latin America, out of Paulo Freire, was informing the way people were rethinking what education was. That completely connect for me with the group from the Philippines and it still informs how one goes about trying to create anything now. I can do the research of putting this in context, but then the telling of the story has to be tested back with the people whose stories it is and on every level. I have to commit to listening so that when someone says, “that’s wrong or that needs to change”, then it’s not an argument.

How does that then fit into the project as a whole? The most gratifying thing for me was at the end of it when we finished the video and we sent it back to Edwin in Vancouver, and he immediately got back and said, “oh wow, this puts our story in the context of these other stories and you see what was going on; give me the link to this, because I want to share it with other people in the community”. Ultimately that’s what you’re trying to do here, is get these stories out to people for whom it has a really important meaning. On Saturday, Donna Wong came up to me at the end and said, “I want to share that link with a bunch of other people in my community. My grandfather paid the head tax and came here, and couldn’t bring my mother until the 1950s, but he would never talk about it”. She said, “he was just as many men who had come back from war and wouldn’t talk about it. It’s too painful, it’s too hard”. She said, “I really don’t know that story”. That’s the important thing, is that this kind of work can fill in some of those pieces where there’s conscious and in some cases actually mandated gaps in our storytelling.

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