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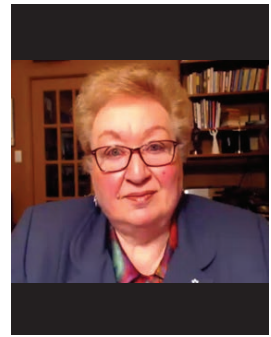
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Highlighting goodness NDP proud of their record

CYNTHIA RAMSAY

Tikkun olam, the imperative to repair the world in which we live, is a core influence of the project Grounds for Goodness Downtown Eastside: Adventures in Digital Community Art Making. Led by Toronto-based theatre designer and educator Ruth Howard, the residency is part of the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival.

The festival runs Oct. 28 to Nov. 8, and Grounds for Goodness, which “explores why and how people sometimes do good things towards others,” takes place Oct. 30 to Nov. 12. It comprises participant and audience interactive story-sharing, art-making, workshops and an evolving gallery online, as well as Downtown Eastside window displays. The residency is co-produced by Jumbles Theatre and Arts and Vancouver Moving Theatre.

Howard – who has participated in the festival before (jewishindependent.ca/putting-heart-into-city) – is the founder of Jumbles. She said tikkun olam is an underlying motivator in all her work – “and one of this project’s explicit intents is to connect its themes and questions, my Jewish heritage as a second generation Holocaust survivor and my vocation a community-engaged artist.

“Community arts is predicated on the working belief that bringing people together across differences can foster commonality and understanding,” she explained. “And yet, growing up in the 1960s, as the child of a German Jewish refugee (my mother and family escaped to England in 1938) and an experimental psychologist, I was bred on evidence that groups of people tend to do atrocious things towards others, with goodness being individual heroic exceptions. I was told at a young age about [Stanley] Milgram’s electric shock experiments, and understood the link between such cautionary tales and attempts by survivors to explain the Holocaust. My own uncle – Henri Tajfel, both social psychologist and Holocaust survivor – coined the term ‘social identity theory.’



Grounds for Goodness Downtown Eastside: Adventures in Digital Community Art Making, led by Ruth Howard, is part of the Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival, which starts Oct. 28.

“Therefore, my attention was grabbed a few years ago when I read some books about the saving of Danish and Bulgarian Jewish populations during the Holocaust by citizens of those countries. The Danish story was slightly familiar to me and the Bulgarian one not at all. I have since become quite obsessed by these and other instances (for example, Albania, the Rosenstrasse protests) that run against the grain of my and other people’s common assumptions about human behaviour and ‘nature.’ I felt compelled to tell these stories and learn more about the reasons behind them. I started to investigate the notion of ‘social goodness’ from many angles: history, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, memory, folk tale, legend, theory.

With the help of independent research and creation grants, Howard “gradually brought the project into the work of Jumbles, inviting and including the responses of diverse community participants and groups. Now, we have a broad and growing repertoire of stories with which to play.

“However,” she stressed, “it’s important to me to uphold the project’s origins in Jewish perspectives and histories, and my own Jewishness: a complicated mix of darkness, hope and urgency to understand how to culti-

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PAT JOHNSON

Premier John Horgan sent Selina Robinson a message: “A mensch is a good thing, right?”

Robinson, the NDP government’s minister of municipal affairs and housing, is seeking reelection in the riding of Coquitlam-Maillardville. She sees herself as the Jewish maven around the cabinet table.

“I said yes, who called you a mensch?” Robinson recalled. “He just wanted to double-check.”

As she and other New Democrats campaign toward the Oct. 24 provincial election, Robinson and fellow cabinet member George Heyman spoke with the *Jewish Independent*. (In this issue, we also speak with Jewish candidates and spokespeople for other parties.)

As minister of housing, Robinson takes pride in the development of a major initiative called Homes for B.C.: A 30-Point Plan for Housing Affordability in British Columbia. Her ministry engaged with housing groups, renters, developers, economists, local government officials, planners and other thinkers. Then they convened people in a “World Café,” an engagement exercise in which people from different perspectives sit at a table and must come to agreed-upon recommendations on a topic.

“It was from that that we picked the best ideas and so it really came from all sides of the housing sector rather than pitting them against each other,” she said, acknowledging that she had to convince some to buy into the process because bureaucracy is not always amenable to novel approaches.

She cited two particular areas that she wants to “kvell about.” BC Housing, the agency that develops, manages and administers a range of subsidized housing in the province, is building housing on First Nations land.

“The feds, I don’t think, are building a lot of Indigenous housing and they’re supposed to,” she said. “No other province has stepped up to do that.... You’re a British Columbian and you need housing... if it’s land on reserve, it’s land on reserve – we’ll build housing.”

By providing housing in First Nations communities, it also helps people remain at home, rather than moving to the city, where housing is even more expensive and possibly precarious, she said.



Selina Robinson

“I’m very proud of that,” Robinson said.

The other point of pride is, Robinson admitted, “a geeky piece of legislation.” When she stepped into the role as the government’s lead on housing availability and affordability, she recognized that there is no data on what kind of housing exists and what’s needed.

“Local governments are responsible for land-use planning and deciding what kind of housing goes where – this is going to be multifamily, this is going to be single-family – but, if you were to ask them, how much do you have, how much more multifamily do you need, they couldn’t tell you, because nobody was collecting the data.”

She brought forward legislation that mandated local governments to do a housing needs assessment every five years to identify whether more housing options are needed for different age groups and types of families.

She also cited the government’s development of social housing, through the allocation of \$7 billion over 10 years to build 39,000 units. So far, 25,000 units are either open, in construction or going through the municipal development process.

“My biggest worry is that the Liberals [if they are elected] will cancel all of those that are still in the development stage because they did that in 2001 when they formed government,” she said. “We’re so far behind the eight ball because they did that. I’m not say-

ing it would have fixed everything, but, if there were another 5,000 units of housing out there, it wouldn’t be as bad

as it is because there would be another 5,000 units.”

Every Friday, Robinson lights Shabbat candles and then shares a reflection on social media about her week.

“Lighting the Shabbat candles just grounds me in my identity,” she said. “I make myself take 10 minutes on a Friday at sundown to stop and to clear my head and to remind myself why I do the work. It’s not for the pay. It’s not for any of that; it’s not worth it. It’s who I am, what are my values and what’s important to me? What did I hear this week that reminds me of why this work is important?”

Robinson admitted she’s being partisan in saying that she believes NDP values are Jewish values.

“From my perspective, taking care of the world – whether it’s the environment, the people and all that’s within it – is our collective responsibility,” she said, adding with a laugh: “I think all Jews are New Democrats who just don’t know it yet.”

George Heyman, minister of environment and climate change strategy, is seeking reelection in the riding of Vancouver-Fairview. He is a son of Holocaust refugees, who escaped the Nazis with the help of Chiune Sugihara, the Japanese diplomat in Lithuania who illegally issued visas to about 6,000 Jews, many of whose descen-

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HEART from page 1

vate grounds for goodness through never forgetting what can happen in its absence.”

The Jumbles team in Toronto includes Howard’s daughter, web designer and choir conductor Shifra Cooper, and composer Martin van de Ven, also a member of the Jewish community.

In addition to being a composer for film, television, theatre and dance, van de Ven is a music facilitator and educator. He is also a clarinetist and has performed with the Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band, Chutzpah Ensemble, and Beyond the Pale. He has been involved in many Jumbles projects – as musical director, composer and/or performer. “Ruth and I have written several choral works together,” he told the *Independent*.

“To me, Jumbles is the embodiment of a music and art-making philosophy that believes the arts are there for everyone to create and not just for the well-trained elite,” he said. “Composers such as John Cage and Canada’s R. Murray Schafer talk about this in their writing and both were an early influence on my music education. Jumbles allows me to use my own skills and training to combine the efforts of trained and non-trained performers to create art, and specifically music, that serves the purpose of the moment, whether a stand-alone piece or something that supports a story being told. I think this work is important; it democratizes and de-commodifies music-making and breaks down barriers to creation for community members who are otherwise shut out of the creative process. The myth that music-making is the sole purview of the highly skilled, and it is only worthwhile if it is commodified into a product to be consumed, is damaging to the whole idea of *‘homo ludens’*, the idea that a fundamental human attribute is the ability to play, invent and create.”

The community choir that Cooper directs embodies this concept of art being for everyone.

“The Gather Round Singers is an intergenerational community choir, made up of 30-plus mixed-ability, multi-aged singers, from across Toronto and beyond,” she said. “We exist within Jumbles Theatre, and so share their dedication to radical inclusivity and benefit from their experience in creating interdisciplinary work.”

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, the choir has been meeting weekly online since April, said Cooper, “to rehearse and perform new choral works designed or adapted for this new context” – that “[c]horal music is among the more challenging forms to adapt to online gathering, as video calling platforms such as Zoom are designed to reduce vocal overlap, and create latency that makes in-sync singing impossible.”

The Gather Round Singers will perform two new pieces for the opening of the DTES Vancouver residency, said Cooper – “one a world première by Martin van de Ven and one a work-in-progress by Arie Verheul van de Ven, both of which were developed this summer especially to be performed on Zoom. These are both part of Jumbles’ larger Grounds for Goodness project, which continues until a final presentation in June 2021, and will include several other new musical and choral pieces... and other composers (including Andrew Balfour, Christina Volpini and Cheldon Paterson).”

“Grounds for Goodness overall is a multi-year project that includes many partners, places and participants,” explained Howard. “It has been taking place through real-live and virtual activities for almost two years. There have been episodes in Nipissing First Nation (near North Bay, Ont.), Montreal, Brampton, the Ottawa Valley, Algoma Region (northern Ontario), and with various Toronto groups... We have received funds to tour the project, which have now been adapted to allow for virtual touring.’ The Vancouver iteration is the next big chapter in this project.”

For Grounds for Goodness Downtown Eastside, Martin van de Ven said, “we’ll be premiering a work called ‘Besá.’ ‘Besá’ is an Albanian Islamic concept

about hospitality and the need to help and protect guests and those in need within and beyond your community.

“In Albania, during the Second World War (and Italian and then Nazi occupation), this meant that almost all Jewish people living and finding refuge in Albania were sheltered and hidden, and Albania ended up with a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than at the beginning. We created a work based on texts found in writings and



Martin van de Ven

from the book *Besa: Muslims who Saved Jews During WW II* by Norman H. Gershan.

“The COVID-19 restrictions prevented us from developing this piece as we normally would,” he continued, “and so I composed a work that could be performed and rehearsed with everyone being online. It involved researching the technology, experimenting with Zoom meetings and audio programs, as well as writing music that allowed for enough flexibility to deal with internet latency. For our Vancouver residency, we will be presenting this work and sharing our experience of creating an artwork to be performed online with members of the Vancouver art community.”

Those Vancouver artists include Savannah Walling, Olivia C. Davies, Beverly Dobrinsky, Khari Wendell McClelland, Renae Morriseau and Rianne Svelnis, as well as 10 DTES-involved participants.

Van de Ven started music lessons when he was 6 years old – on recorder. “In elementary school,” he said, “my friends and I decided we wanted to form a circus. As the only one in the group with musical training, I was charged with writing the theme for the circus band. I dutifully started writing down half notes and quarter notes on paper and tried to play them on the recorder. The method worked fine but I soon realized I would need some additional training if I wanted it to sound good.

“I ended up with a musical education partially shaped by my father’s interest and taste for very modern classical and jazz music and eventually formal training at university,” he said. “In my late teens, I realized that my interest in science and engineering paled compared to the excite-

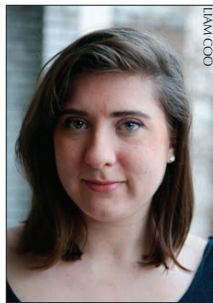
ment I felt for a live performance, whether as an audience member or as a performer.”

In university, in addition to his formal training, van de Ven was involved in various jazz programs and, eventually, studied and performed in free improv ensembles. He also did a short stint in Europe, studying early computer music in electronic sound synthesis.

“Klezmer music has a history deeply rooted in East European and Middle Eastern music traditions. As a clarinetist,” he said, “it provided for me a wonderful vehicle to not only deeply emerge myself into a culture other than my own but also perform a lead role playing in a band.”

For her part, Cooper has loved choral singing her whole life. “And I bring this love to my own work,” she said, “while having always believed that bringing together community arts and choral singing requires a flexibility and a softening of our understanding of the boundaries of what ‘choral music’ can be – this is something that I have always been creatively driven by. In these times, I’m learning a lot more about how far this can go.

“Sometimes, turning things on their head can be revealing of new approaches, considerations or perspectives,” she said. “For example, one young woman who has sung with the choir for many years, said to me the other day: ‘In rehearsal, I always sit in the back row, so I only see the backs of people’s heads. I like on Zoom that I can see the faces of everyone I’m singing and performing with.’ Another choir member told me that she feels more confident and motivated



Shifra Cooper

to practise when she has her microphone off and is alone in her room following along – this confidence comes through strikingly in the recordings she shared with me for one of our digital projects. In these ways, sometimes, working online has revealed the limitations of our previously established norms for singing in-person. I think often now about how, whenever we can safely be back together, we might incorporate these learnings.

“Which is not to gloss over any of the challenges of meeting online,” stressed Cooper. “I think I can speak for at least the majority of the choir when I say we all immensely miss singing together – in sync, in harmony, in rhythm. And a digital space, even though full of many possibilities, is also full of boundaries and obstacles to folks joining in, especially those experiencing more precarious housing or financial insecurity. Our team worked closely all summer with members of the choir community to bridge this gap, purchasing and delivering internet-enabled devices to choir members and providing remote and in-person (socially distanced) trainings and trouble-shooting.” They did so with funding from several sources, notably the Toronto Foundation.

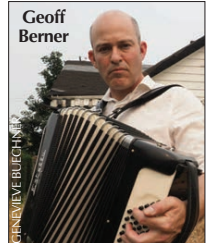
“Another part of my work has often included event management and digital design and, in the new reality of virtual art-making, these two often come together in interesting ways,” Cooper added. “I’m delighted to be designing a new interactive website for Grounds for Goodness at the DTES Heart of the City Festival, that will act as an online evolving gallery, showcasing new work created through the community workshops and acting as the container and guide for the culminating virtual event.”

For the full festival schedule, visit heartofthecityfestival.com. 📍

Berner part of Heart

CYNTHIA RAMSAY

The theme for this year’s Downtown Eastside Heart of the City Festival is “This Gives Us Strength.” One of the more than 50 events that will take place over the festival’s 12 days is Spotlight on the East End on Oct. 30, 8:30 p.m. Curated by artist-in-residence Khari Wendell McClelland, the online presentation will feature “the compelling creativity and strength of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside-involved artists and residents who illuminate the vitality, relevance and resilience of our neighbourhood and its rich traditions, cultural roots and music.” Among those artists is klezmer-punk accordionist Geoff Berner, with whom *J* readers will be familiar.



Geoff Berner

J: You released *Welcome to the Grand Hotel Cosmopolis* late last year (jewishindependent.ca/honestly-jewish-and-radical) and you also had a new musical, then COVID hit. What have you been doing creatively over this time?

GB: I just finished working on a lovely project for KlezKanada with the great theatre artist Jenny Romaine and a lot of other talented folks. It’s called *Vu Bistu Geven?* (Where Have You Been?) and it’s about figuring out the history of the land that KlezKanada takes place on. It was commissioned for their 25th anniversary. I felt particularly right to work with Trina Stacey, a Kanien’kéha singer, researcher and teacher. We talked a lot during the making of the piece about the value of recovering our ancestors’ languages, in order to find a way to think outside of capitalism and colonialism.

J: You were scheduled to perform an outdoors concert in Roberts Creek Sept. 11. Did that happen? In what ways does an in-person audience affect your performance?

GB: Yep, that concert went off nicely. Everyone was outdoors and properly distanced. The folks in Roberts Creek are lovely. I’ve played only two other shows like that since the pandemic, one at a park in Vancouver, for Alan Zisman, and another in Chilliwack at the Tractor Gazebo. It sure was nice to play live again. It’s been a bit of a strain these past months, not being able to do the thing I’ve devoted my life to doing. I miss that magic human connection that only live music can do.

J: What inspires you to participate in events like the DTES Heart of the City Festival?

GB: What inspires me is the honour to be invited. I’ve tried to be a friend to folks in the DTES, opposing displacement by City Hall-backed developers, fighting to stop the war on drugs, fighting against legislated poverty, and other stuff. It means a lot that I’m allowed to be part of things.

J: Chelm is a recurring theme/subject in your work. If you had to offer “advice from Chelm” for people coping right now, what might that be?

GB: Advice from Chelm: Well, Chelm was the “Village of Fools” of Jewish legend, but in fact it was a real place, where the people had to struggle to survive. They weren’t fools at all, just ordinary people trying to live. Several fine Yiddish poets came from Chelm. So the advice from Chelm is, the real fools are people who look down on communities of other human beings.

J: You helped start the BC Ecosocialist Party. Any opinions on the election you’d like to share?

GB: I have real hopes for the BC Ecosocialists. B.C. voters need to at least have the choice to be able to vote for people who will actually stand up against LNG, Site C, legislated poverty, colonialism and the war on drugs.

Heart of the City runs Oct. 28 to Nov. 8. For tickets and information, visit heartofthecityfestival.com. 📍