Straight
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Stagestuck

Un-mellow Yellow
OYR presentation looks at Canucks at war

By MARTIN MORROW

0ne Yellow Rabbit's *Somalia Yellow* closes with this pointed comparison: Ridley Scott's *BlackHawk Down* was shot in Morocco on a budget of $150 million. AllanHarding MacKay's *Somalia Yellow* video was shot in Somalia, paid for out of MacKay's own pocket, and he's currently $30,000 in debt.

It's the difference between commercial and "serious" art. . Scott, a Hollywood mythmaker, crafted an action movie about U.S. troops in Somalia, that was meant to reinforce Americans' feelings of pride in their armed forces. MacKay, a civilian war artist, shot authentic video footage of the Canadian troops there with no agenda other than to capture his fleeting impressions of their activities and the country itself in the six days allotted him. He just happened to arrive at the Canadian Airborne Regiment's Belet Huen compound in the immediate wake of a Somali teenager's torture and murder, and the attempted suicide of his accused killer, Master Cpl. Clayton Matchee.

Even so, MacKay's video does not make an effort to explain or condemn what happened. It only offers mute wit-ness, to the scenes of the crime. A journalist would have spent his every waking moment that six days pursuing the unfolding scandal, but MacKay is a visual artist, and, apart from taking a shot of Matchee's holding cell, he was preoccupied with aesthetics: The, changing image of a termite mound in the desert. The composition of a group of Somali women turning their backs to his camera.

MacKay's *Somalia Yellow* is rough, enigmatic, with some haunting imagery. It begs a lot of questions. One Yellow Rabbit's *Somalia Yellow* sets out to ask them, putting MacKay on the hot seat and grilling him as if he were part of the government's official Somalia- inquiry,. When MacKay's replies are circuitous and evasive, his interrogators. tell him to just answer the question, please. Denise Clarke repeats the facts like a lawyer hammering them home for the jury: "Let me get this straight: You were in, Somalia for six days, you shot a hour and a half of video, and you've been working on it for FIVE years?"

Andy Curtis takes the voice of the philistine. Reviewing slides of traditional paintings at the Canadian War Museum, he compares them with MacKay's postmodern war art and feels the latter comes up short. Michael Green rises to MacKay's defense. What do you want?" he asks. "Something heroic and drab?"

There is nothing heroic or drab about the scenes presented on the large upstage screen. Traveling shots taken from a convoy passing through Mogadishu glide by the bombed-out shells of buildings and you think also of Afghanistan and the West Bank, of poor lands repeatedly pummeled into the ground by endless wars. You wonder that people even have the heart to rebuild things (Later, MacKay - who is here neither to condemn nor praise the Canadian Army - points out that our soldiers helped with the repairs, one of the many good deeds overshadowed by the infamy of the Belet Huen events).

You see a way of life that hasn't changed much in centuries, as Somali butchers slit an animal's throat at an outdoor abattoir and give the blood to a woman who pours it over a naked boy in some kind of healing ritual. Even without the added irony of a "good" bloodbath, die episode is troubling, for MacKay has turned it into a slow, solemn ballet devoid of horror and disgust. Before our eyes, he is doing what artists have always done, transforming a violent act into abstract beauty.

The Rabbits don't just fire questions at MacKay. They give their own dramatic interpretation of the Somali affair. Across the stage from the artist, a second interview is conducted, cloaked in shadows and also captured on video. Green plays ' the brain-damaged Matchee, -who was found unfit to stand trial, and Clarke is his emotional inquisitor. The native soldier dredges up boyhood memories of life on the rez, from happy, tales of ice fishing to painful one's of being beaten by his father. Again, the irony is thick -that Matchee, a victim of Canadian racism, should have ended up in Somalia, treating that country's aboriginals with the same hostility.

MacKay’s abattoir scene and Green's quietly harrowing monologue as Matchee (delivered entirely with his head bent and his back to- the audience) are the highlight o fthis unusual theatre-visual art, hybrid, first seen in slightly different form at the 1998 High Performance Rodeo: MacKay's video vignettes are meagre but fascinating, raw . documentary evolving into what could be called motion paintings. The Rabbits' questions, In contrast, are abundant and overwhelming. They raise more topics than any one-hour show could possibly deal with: What constitutes art, what happened in Somalia, the savage culture of the soldier, the responsibilities of the artist, etc., etc.

Even that controversy du jour, the use of the word "nigger," is discussed. Blake Brooker, who wrote and directed the piece,makes this another of his theatrical meditations. He proffers no conclusions, just a whole lot of food for thought to chew over afterwards.

His production looks like a cross between a TV talk show and the famous screening-room scene at the beginning of Citizen Kane.. During the video sequences, Cimmeron Meyer's lighting keeps the actors half-hidden in shadows below the projection screen. During the Q&A, they gather round the seated MacKay, who has been placed on a riser in the shape, of a bright yellow disc –

literally on the spot. The Rabbits' signature physicality is subdued - even dancer Clarke limits herself to just a morsel of interpretive movement to accompany one of the video images.

There is the odd wisecrack, the odd bit of amusing business, but otherwise this is one of the most sombre shows One Yellow Rabbit has created. It's zeitgeist theatre, capturing the sombre spirit of the times.