

## Perchance Theatre. The Power of One. Danielle Irvine, artistic director. Cupids, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020–21

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Volume 36, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092575ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1092575ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

O'Brien, T. (2021). Compte rendu de [Perchance Theatre. The Power of One. Danielle Irvine, artistic director. Cupids, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020–21]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 36(2), 333–339.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1092575ar>

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Perchance Theatre. *The Power of One*. Danielle Irvine, artistic director. Cupids, Newfoundland and Labrador, 2020–21.

Perchance Theatre (formerly known as New World Theatre Project) is nestled in the trees at the end of a grassy field in Cupids, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. Modelled after London's Globe, the theatre was built with rough boards and sail canvas in 2010 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of John Guy's settlement in the area. Since then, the theatre has presented annual open-air performances of Shakespeare and classical theatre, and in recent years it has regularly produced works by playwrights from Newfoundland and Labrador. Perchance's eleventh season was interrupted by the pandemic when COVID-19 restrictions made the theatre's traditional summer season format impossible. Faced with the reality of closed public spaces and minimal social contact, artistic director Danielle Irvine says that she "decided to lean into the problem rather than avoid it" and focused on two goals: providing creative work for artists and delivering that art to an audience.

Through a 41-week collaborative effort involving dozens of professionals who contributed expertise in acting, filming, social media, marketing, and logistics, Perchance built *The Power of One*, an online collection of performances delivered by 41 actors in locations across Newfoundland and Labrador ([www.perchancetheatre.com/the-power-of-one.html](http://www.perchancetheatre.com/the-power-of-one.html)). The series includes one monologue from every play in Shakespeare's canon, along with one sonnet. Today, the word "power" is typically used to denote strength, authority, influence, or force, but during Shakespeare's time, "power" also described language, specifically

“the meaning expressed by a word or phrase in a particular context” (“power”). Irvine situates the power of Shakespeare’s monologues within the contexts of individual performance, the global pandemic, and the history and natural beauty of what is now called Newfoundland and Labrador. Since a thorough discussion of *The Power of One* would constitute a major project, what follows here is a review of the highlights of five monologues, from *As You Like It*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Coriolanus*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*. This sampling provides a representation of what viewers receive from each of the 41 videos: displays of the complexity and beauty of Shakespeare’s language, the interpretive and improvisational talent of Newfoundland and Labrador actors and musicians, and phenomenal camerawork featuring drone footage of the province’s geographical diversity.

The series opens with a video capturing the absence and hope that underlie much of the project. In late spring of a normal year, Perchance puts out a call for theatre members and supporters to “storm the stage” and help restore the structure for the upcoming season. People bring their own tools and skills and assist with reinstalling the sailcloth roof as well as making any necessary repairs or renovations. Such public engagement and participation are hallmarks of the Perchance approach to theatre and performance. *The Power of One*’s first monologue was recorded in September 2020 and shows no evidence of the communal activity one would normally see after the summer season. Instead, the camera pans over exposed trusses and bare wooden benches. Greg Malone walks onto Perchance’s stage squinting against the sunlight in the roofless theatre as he surveys the empty seats (<https://youtu.be/A7CauROttSg>). He sighs and begins melancholic courtier Jaques’s monologue from *As You Like It*, reassuring the online audience that closed theatres do not spell the end of performance, since “All the world’s a stage” (2.7.139). Malone does not move from centre stage, nor does he break his forward gaze as he instructs listeners on the nature of life and death and a human being’s place in the world. His heartening performance is made more genuine by the trust and love local audiences have for this actor, a well-known public figure who was

co-founder of CODCO and the Wonderful Grand Band. In the last lines, he hushes his voice and slows his cadence; here, each of Shakespeare's phrases is laden with particular relevance to the current global situation: "Last scene of all, / That ends this strange eventful history, / Is second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.163–66). He smiles, shrugs, and descends the stage's steps, sighing as he walks out of the theatre, hopeful but uncertain about when or if there will be a return to the stage. Filmmaker Jamie Skidmore's talents are featured here as the camera smoothly follows Malone from the theatre, remaining centred above and behind the actor and capturing his isolation as he walks through the doors and into the empty field beyond. The alternating close-ups of Malone on stage and panoramic shots of him alone in the silenced shell of a performance house testify to the social cost of the pandemic.

One of the motivating forces behind *The Power of One* was to showcase Newfoundland and Labrador performers, an objective complicated by the confines of pandemic restrictions on travel and social contact. Irvine's team capitalized on "social bubbles" and online resources to overcome such obstacles, resulting in videos featuring collaborations between directors, actors, filmmakers, songwriters, and musicians. Owen van Houten, for example, was able to travel with fellow actor Stephen Oates to perform a monologue from *Love's Labour's Lost* on Musgrave Harbour Beach in February 2021 (<https://youtu.be/1hEC0-wVKa8>). Van Houten is hilarious as braggart Don Armado, who, appalled at the effect love has on him, paces the sand, bemoaning the loss of his valour while punctuating his recitation with fencing movements. The piece is accompanied by *Valse des Niglos*, a bright up-tempo instrumental composed by musicians Dwayne Côté and Duane Andrews, whose unique blend of folk and jazz complements van Houten's lively choreography. The video ends with the revelation that Oates has been carving in the sand off-screen throughout the performance; as the video backs away from van Houten, panning farther and farther out, it shows dozens of carvings that stretch hundreds of metres down the beach, including hearts with "D+J" written

in them, “TLA,” and various whimsical symbols of love and happiness, all invalidating Armado’s bravado.

The production team chose filming locations that are representative of the province’s natural features, meaningful to the actor, and that offer potentially new ways to think about the texts and their relevance to modern audiences. For *Coriolanus*, the selected scene and setting are at a juncture between past and present; the old “normal” is inaccessible and one must decide how to move forward to an uncertain future (<https://youtu.be/AHIEDI7x4P4>). Unable to reconcile his identity as a soldier with the political expectations placed on him by his domineering mother, the Roman general, Coriolanus, is torn between two worlds. He prides himself on his independent nature and on his military prowess, but his identity as a soldier requires him to depend on the presence of an enemy in order to assert that identity. His inflexible nature renders him helpless, unable to traverse the gap between his contradictory characteristics or to accept guidance from others. Irvine cast Stephen Oates to deliver Coriolanus’s fifth-act monologue in which he reveals isolation, doubt, pride, and arrogance as he faces an embassy of Roman women sent to dissuade him from aligning with the Volscians to attack Rome. Irvine envisioned the Roman general trapped between two identities and two worlds and so set the monologue at Bishop’s Falls Trestle Bridge in central Newfoundland. The scene begins with Oates’s figure parting ways with someone at the centre of the bridge. He turns to face the camera with the bridge, river, and forested banks shrinking behind him; the panoramic image minimizes Coriolanus’s stature. The Exploits River laps quietly in the video’s background, discordant with the anguish Coriolanus is feeling as his mother, wife, and child approach. Oates delivers his lines in hushed tormented tones; he is at first fixed on attacking the people who banished him and is disdainful towards those sent to deter him, but he vacillates when he sees his family. Battle has wearied him, but he is not yet done, and the burden is on him alone to choose the path forward that will best serve himself, his family, and his people, as if he “were author of himself / And knew no other kin” (5.3.36-37).

The power of geography and history figure prominently in the location for Perchance's *Twelfth Night* ([https://youtu.be/0YfC\\_wQyR1A](https://youtu.be/0YfC_wQyR1A)). Shakespeare named *Twelfth Night* for the Feast of the Epiphany on 6 January, which is the last night of Christmas celebrations on the Christian calendar. In Elizabethan England, the day was one of misrule during which "a rigidly hierarchical social order that ordinarily demanded deference, sobriety, and strict obedience to authority temporarily gave way to raucous rituals of inversion" (Greenblatt 478). After the festivities, social order would return to normal. The Perchance team premiered their *Twelfth Night* contribution to *Power of One* on 5 January 2021 and set the play in Labrador. The camera pans over a stark snow-laden landscape, settling on Joan Dicker clad in a toque and fur-lined parka, sitting on a rock wall outside the Illusuak Cultural Centre in Nain, Nunatsiavut. Playing the part of Feste, the licensed fool in the play who challenges power by speaking truth, she sings Nukappiakulunga (The Wind and The Rain; *Twelfth Night* 5.1.375–94) in her native Inuktitut. Drone footage and stills share spectacular images from Nain and Hebron: the restored Hebron Mission; the crumbling shells of abandoned buildings and homes left behind after the forced relocation of Hebron in 1959; a person skidooing in front of brightly coloured bungalows. This video is a reclamation of sorts. Dicker sings a song composed for an Elizabethan play written when the English were barely beginning to contemplate the global geographic and historical reach they would have, but she sings it in Inuktitut against the backdrop of modern architecture and the decaying remnants of an aggressive colonialist endeavour.

The performance draws on the northern Labrador Inuit tradition of Naluyuk Night, which occurs on the day or eve of Epiphany, or Old Christmas Day. According to the custom, "a small group of men would leave the community in daylight and return in the dark as naluyuks. The children of each household were questioned as to their behaviour over the past year and could be hit with sticks wielded by the naluyuks if they had not been 'good'; children were often required to sing Moravian hymns in Inuktitut and were often given gifts by the naluyuks"

(Lunde 1). For the Inuit, this night of cultural interspersion marked a return to normalcy, to some degree, as the Moravian-imposed holidays ended. The song Dicker sings is placed at the very ending of *Twelfth Night*, after transformations and revelations have corrected the confused identities, mourning, separation, and betrayal from earlier in the play. Likewise, Dicker's translation and performance, along with the visuals, capture personal, historic, and geographic transformations expressed through her "one face" and "one voice" (5.1.206).

*The Power of One* closes in June 2021 with Allison Moira Kelly standing in the forest delivering one of Shakespeare's best-known monologues as Prince Hamlet (<https://youtu.be/bMr5TZ0r-aE>). "To be or not to be," she says, as if preparing to answer the question posed by Malone's Jaques in the series' first instalment: will there be a return to the stage? She finishes speaking and turns; the camera follows her as she walks towards the shuttered theatre, but unlike the setting for Malone's exit nine months earlier, the sail roof is now in place on the structure. Kelly reaches the door, casts a hopeful smile back to the camera, and enters to enthusiastic applause and cheering. The revelry continues as the video shows her spinning around on the stage, arms wide, embracing the ovations of the audience. This buoyancy jars against the uncertainty she expressed in her monologue a few seconds earlier and answers the question about a return to live theatre for the 2021 season with a decisive yes. While Malone's schedule prevented him from participating, Perchance staged *As You Like It* in summer 2021 alongside *Hamlet*, with Kelly playing the titular role; accompanying the two Shakespearean dramas was a restaging of local playwright Megan Gail Coles's *Our Eliza* (directed by Lois Brown). By grounding the 2021 season in the plays that bookend *The Power of One* series, Perchance brought closure to the ambitious project and added another successful dimension to the company's diverse production history.

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