

An Audience of Trees: R. Murray Schafer's *The Princess of the Stars*¹

The blur between sleeping and waking, early, early morning. Mist rising from the lake. But it is real mist, not from a smoke machine, and a real lake. It is really five o'clock in the morning, and, having been bussed over a rugged logging road for forty minutes, I am seated on a rude plank bench, haunch to haunch with strangers, my feet almost touching the water – since I'm in the front row – the rest of the two hundred or so audience seated improbably behind me.

We are sitting in silence, in near-total darkness, self-consciously trying to soak in the strangeness of it all. I've rarely been with a crowd of people so still. Water laps against the shore quietly, and there is an occasional bird call, water fowl, frog or crow. Rain has threatened all day and night, the site is damp, the sky overcast, and I have my tarp with me just in case. The plastic made an annoying crackle when I stashed it under my knees. But silence rules as we ponder this remote lake, the bay immediately before us, spits of land on either side, and the distant shore, all wooded, no sign of human habitation. Ten minutes, fifteen....

Suddenly, a soprano voice echoes from nowhere, over there across the water, but impossible to locate. I notice a speck of light on the opposite shore. The performance has begun. Or rather, it has entered a new phase.

R. Murray Schafer's *The Princess of the Stars* is a work of music theatre like no other. With a running time of seventy-eight minutes, the work starts at fifty-two minutes before dawn, so that the appearance of the sun itself provides the climax. Anyone who wishes to experience this strange ritual must take unusual pains to attend, as I did, making the six-hour drive from my home to Ontario's Haliburton Forest last September, then planning my four a.m. rendezvous with the buses that would deliver me to the performance site.

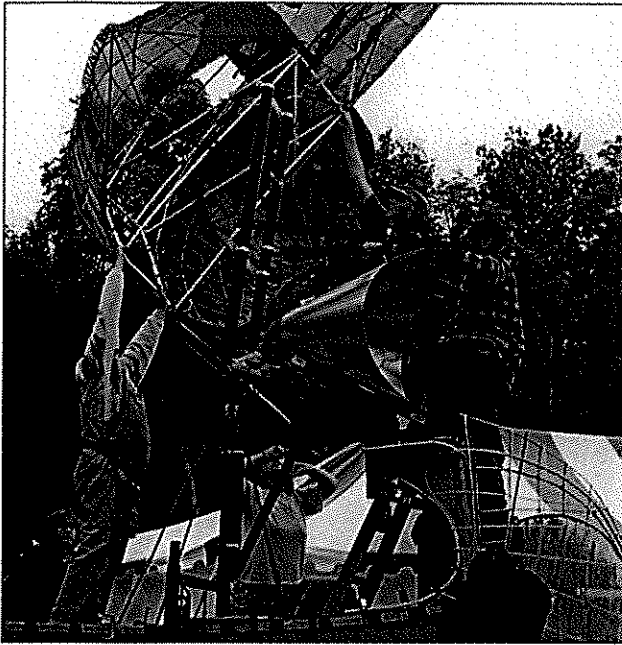
The simple fable is narrated by the Presenter, who explains the ritual enacted by enormous figures mounted on giant canoes on the water. The soprano, never seen, is the Princess, daughter of the Sun God, who has heard Wolf on earth, but, leaning too far to hear him, has fallen from heaven. Wolf, startled by her light, wounds the Princess, who flees into the forest. But she is captured by

the Three-Horned Enemy, who holds her captive in the depths of the lake.

First we see the Presenter – the speck of light turns out to be his approaching canoe. Then the Wolf canoe appears, bearing a huge moveable wolf figure and a sound poet who provides his voice. They summon the Dawn Birds – six dancers in six small canoes that perform a slow-motion “dance” on the water. (Their appearance is timed to coincide with the activity of the real dawn birds around the lake; the interaction of flute and clarinet with real birdsong is magical.) But the roaring of the Three-Horned Enemy – another sound poet, amplified with an electronic loudhailer (the work's sole concession to technology) – is heard before his canoe emerges from the opposite side and engages Wolf in battle. They are silenced, however, by the appearance of the Sun Disc from the far side of the lake (timed to coincide with sunrise). The Sun orders the Three-Horned Enemy to return the stars to the sky, but the Princess must remain with him until her redemption. Wolf must find the Princess and redeem her in a final trial; if successful, he will win eternal life as the moon.

The “Wolf Project” is music theatre cast in the form of a seven-day camping trip in which the participants (not “the audience”) reunite Wolf and Princess.

This plot, of Schafer's own devising, resembles a Native American legend – and it does risk romanticizing the Amerindian, though the score tells us that it was actually suggested by the Egyptian *Triumph of Horus*, possibly the most ancient extant play. *The Princess of the Stars* serves as prologue to Schafer's still unfinished *Patria*, a monumental cycle of twelve works of unparalleled theatrical innovation and complexity.² Each work represents a version of hero, heroine and enemy, mixing the native legend with stories of Theseus and Ariadne or Beauty and the Beast. The entire cycle has a Jungian subtext, at times explicit, with Wolf representing the Self seeking psychic



Technical crew for *Princess of the Stars* constructing the Three-Horned Enemy. Designed by Jerrard Smith.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRARD SMITH

integration, the Princess as Anima and the Enemy as Shadow. The final work of this cycle, *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*, returns to the wilderness where the cycle began: it is a work of music theatre cast in the form of a seven-day camping trip in which the participants (not "the audience") reunite Wolf and Princess and celebrate their "mystical marriage." (Every August since 1991, Schafer and a group of devotees have participated in the "Wolf Project" in Haliburton Forest, developing this audacious finale.)³

Schafer is proud that his work is inseparable from place, untransportable and unpackageable.

Given the complexities of the subsequent works in the *Patria* cycle, *The Princess of the Stars* is disarming in its simplicity. What is it about? Its "meaning" lies, I think, not so much in its plot, or in the Jungian symbolism that emerges in subsequent *Patria* works, as in the ritualized experience of the audience. Most obviously, *Princess* is a celebration of place – the wilderness and its "soundscape" (the word is Schafer's invention). It accepts the uncertainties of weather as a condition of its existence: As the score indicates, "This is a living environment and therefore utterly changeable at any moment. The lighting alone is in a constant state of change and atmospheric disturbances can arise at any moment.... Each performance of the work will be tinged with the excitement of a premiere" (4). The 1981 premiere at Heart Lake took place despite heavy rainfall, as did the dress rehearsal of the 1997 Wildcat Lake performance. As Schafer notes in the score, such conditions fill performers and audience with "humility before the grander forces of the work's setting" (4). The greatest casu-

ality in these presentations, he said, was the reverberation that forms such an important part of the music. In heavy rain, echoes die. Schafer is proud that his work is inseparable from place, untransportable and unpackageable: it could not be produced on Broadway; it cannot be effectively recorded or filmed.

Schafer "no longer wished to entertain theatre customers, but to induce a radical change in their existential status."

More specifically, *Princess* generates a unique experience of space, a heightened awareness of acoustic space. Apart from the canoe ritual on the water, there are nine voices and ten instrumentalists, all invisible to the audience and dispersed around the lakeshore, testing one's capacity for phonolocation. The soprano, I learned later, was more than a kilometre away. And the performers test the site for echoes, and use them with deliberation. While the sense of sight emphasizes separation, hearing has the quality of seeming to enter into the listener, uniting listeners in one acoustic space: it is "like touching at a distance," writes Schafer (*Tuning* 11). In this oddly populated space, human and natural worlds merge.

The work also transforms one's sense of time. In the unfamiliar morning hour, the tempo of *Princess* is determined by the movement of canoes, so that the ritualized action unfolds with the slowness of Japanese Noh. Each gesture takes on an appearance of heightened significance. The storyline assumes an epoch of mythic origins, reinforced by the Presenter's aetiologies: "There is dew on the grass because the Princess ran through the forest; and the mist on the water is the sign of her struggling to be free." And the coincidence of ritual with real events – particularly the awakening birds and the rising sun – kindles a sense



Wolf represents the Self seeking psychic integration. Designed by Jerrard Smith.

PHOTO: ANDRE LEDUC, COURTESY OF PATRIA MUSIC/THEATRE PROJECTS

Editing Unit 5: WOLF'S ARIA

WOLF'S ARIA BEGINS AS THE DRUMMING FADES DOWN. AS HE CHANTS WOLF SLOWLY CIRCES IN THE CENTRE OF THE LAKE.

PERCUSSION 2 LOG DRUM
 PERCUSSION 3 LOG DRUM
 TOM TOM
 PERCUSSION 4 LOG DRUM

NIA NIA NIA TIA TIA TIA TA TA TA TA TIU LIKE A HOWL
 VERY EMPHATIC & DRAWN OUT
 SHANU

SHA-NU TUMÉ SHA-NU TUMÉ SHANU TUMÉ, YUS, YUS, YUS, MA-HÍ KUN

SHA-NU TUMÉ SHA-NU TUMÉ SHA-NU TUMÉ SHA-NU TU-MÉ MU-HÉ KUN

TU-ME-Ó-NI TU-ME-Ó-NI THAI-Ó-NI THAI-Ó-NI WA-YÁ WA-YÁ A-NI-WA-YÁ WA-YA WA-YA A-NI-WA-YÁ WA-YÁ

O-THAI-Ó-NI O-THAI-Ó-NI O-THAI-Ó-NI A-NI-WA-YU YUS, YUS, YUS YUS,

YUS, YUS, NÍP-A-WUM YUS, YUS, YUS, NÍ-PA-WUM YUS, YUS NÍ-PA-WUM YUS BOK-TÚSÍM BOKTÚSÍM BOK-TÚSÍM

Wolf's Aria. Schaffer's concepts and Jerrard and Diana Smith's artwork. COURTESY OF R. MURRAY SCHAFER



The battle between Wolf and the Three-Horned Enemy. Designed by Jerrard Smith.

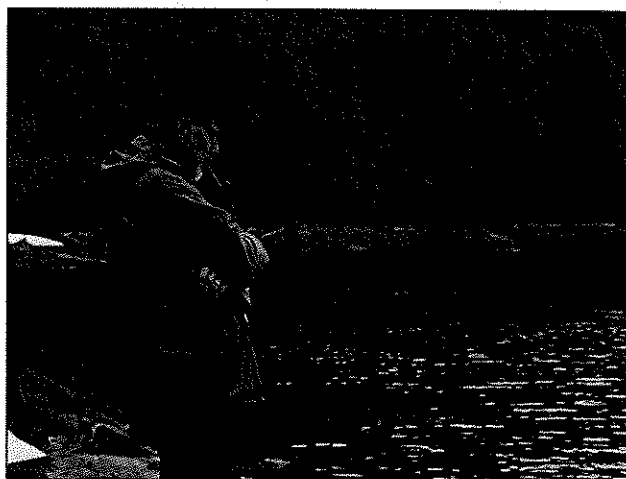
PHOTO: ANDRE LEDUC, COURTESY OF PATRIA MUSIC/THEATRE PROJECTS

of primitive wonder at the experience of dawn, "the most neglected of nature's masterpieces," says Schafer. (Murray is such an articulate commentator on his own work, and his epigrammatic pronouncements are so quotable, that it is often hard to think around them.)

Schafer has written that he "no longer wished to entertain theatre customers, but to induce a radical change in their existential status" (*Patria* 177).⁴ His works, as theatre critic Ray Conlogue astutely noted about Schafer's *Ra*, resemble rites of initiation: The audience are "unshackled from their conventional roles, as executives, husbands or theatregoers.... From what I remember of anthropology, this is what rites of passage are supposed to do – break down conventional roles and open up new perceptions" (qtd. in MacKenzie 178–9). Such an ambition, of course, presupposes a willing initiate, and that is what Schafer's demands of imposed pilgrimage try to ensure. One does not make the effort to attend *Princess* for frivolous reasons – though the urbanized sceptic cannot be left behind completely. Willing as I was last September, I found myself suppressing forgotten memories of Indian impersonators at Boy Scout jamborees. Still, a change in "existential status" is apt to create some kind of discomfort: as the Presenter informs us in his first speech, "the figures you see here are not human." With whom, then, are we supposed (using journalists' cant) to "identify"?

For the meaning of *The Princess of the Stars* at its profoundest level is a challenge to the assumption of a human-centred universe. When Galileo challenged the assumption that earth was the centre of the universe, he was threatened by the Church with burning at the stake. We have come to accept Galileo; but the prevailing assumptions of liberal humanism still place *Homo sapiens* at the centre of a meaningful universe. Schafer's rejection is unsettling. His Presenter, after declaring that there are no human figures here, informs the audience: "in order

that you might witness without disturbing these actions, I shall turn you into trees." Human presence, it seems, can only disrupt the natural order, so *Princess* radically suppresses human presence. Only the Presenter – a kind of earth spirit – speaks the language of the audience. The Princess's aria, like the calls of the animal kingdom, employs vowels only, no consonants, and it incorporates a number of figures that imitate birdsong.⁵ Other passages use words from Native American languages presumably unknown to the audience. *Wolf*, *Three-Horned Enemy* and *Sun Disc* are all played by sound poets using nonsense sounds or invented languages. The music itself is largely indeterminate, indicated by graphic notations, more sound than definite pitch, merging easily with the natural soundscape. Human imposition is present in Schafer's use of the *Patria* tone row, but only in fragments. The dominant percussion sound is that of log drums, fashioned from materials already present on-site; elsewhere sticks or stones are beaten together, while wood blocks uncannily reproduce virtual woodpeckers. Passing through this initiation rite means shedding anthropocentric assumptions of human superiority, human licence to control nature.⁶



R. Murray Schafer at Wildcat Lake. The acoustic space is "like touching at a distance."

PHOTO: ANDRE LEDUC, COURTESY OF PATRIA MUSIC/THEATRE PROJECTS

Schafer's *Princess* grows, of course, out of his research into the acoustic environment, which developed during his years at Simon Fraser University (1965–75) and culminated in his seminal book *The Tuning of the World* (1977). Schafer's first piece written for a wilderness environment was *Music for Wilderness Lake* (1979), scored for twelve trombones distributed around the perimeter of a remote lake and performed in two parts, at dawn and dusk, times when "the wind is slightest and refraction is most apparent." In this composition, Schafer works through some of the production problems of outdoor performance – a process charmingly captured in an award-winning documentary film by Fichman-Sweete Productions of Toronto. But the leap from this small-scale work to *Princess of the Stars* is enormous, and only Schafer's innate pragmatism (an attribute not often credited to him) kept his requirements in balance.

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Recitative of the Three-Horned Enemy. Conceived by Schafer.
COURTESY OF R. MURRAY SCHAFER

For all his maverick individualism, Schafer is an amenable collaborator, receptive to the creative contributions of others. The largest investment for any production of *Princess* is the construction of the Wolf, Enemy and Sun figures for the large canoes; these designs were realized by Jerrard Smith, mask maker and designer, who, along with his partner Diana, has worked with Schafer on several *Patria* projects since the premiere of *Princess* in 1981. The canoe-power was voluntary, supplied largely by members of the Community Centre 55 canoe club, who were lured by the opportunity of practising the art of "paddleography" (see Dutton 59). Their movements were partly guided, as Schafer's score suggests, by "spiking" the lake with weighted ropes under the surface of the water.

Some of the severest demands in performance are on the dancers portraying the six dawn birds, who must deal with the exigencies of movement while standing, fully costumed, in a two-person canoe. Choreographer Sarah Jane Burton discovered that this performance situation places unusual limitations on her craft. Each dancer's torso is needed almost entirely for support, leaving only head and arms free for expressive gesture. In a costume with six-foot wings, beak and only small openings for eyes and ears, the dancer is required to fine-tune these senses to an extraordinary degree. Furthermore, since much of Schafer's score

has little definite pulse, cues for coordinating the six dancers must be mainly visual. As well, there is a fatigue factor: the dawn birds enter thirty minutes into performance and remain in view of the audience (though not at centre stage) through the rest of the piece. And, of course, the unpredictable elements – especially wind – are an ever-present worry. Each dancer was required to undergo a dunking in full costume to help get over fear of falling into the water (though there have been no such mishaps in any performance). The resulting choreography Burton describes as "totem-like" by necessity, unlike any of her other work.

Despite the complex appearance of the score, the musicians I spoke with found that the work came together with amazing ease. Many of the players for this performance had been participants in Schafer's Wolf Project, and were thus acclimatized to Haliburton Forest as well as to Schafer's outlook. But this ease results also from the craftsmanship of the score. Schafer does not call on the musicians, separated at great distances around the lake, to coordinate closely, but allows the parts freedom to overlap. Such coordination as is needed sometimes follows auditory cues – often loud percussion effects. Certain passages

Editing Unit 18: ECHOES FROM THE LAKE

THE VOICE OF THE PRINCESS IS HEARD ECHOING ACROSS THE WATER IN A LONG CANONDA THAT CONTINUES AS ALL THE CHARACTERS DISAPPEAR.

ARADINE
SOUND
VOICE

GROUPS SUPPANO
GROSS VOICES FOR HIGHER VOICES
VOICE BEHINDS OVER A FEW IN BRASS

TRUMPET
TROMBONE
TUBA

PERCUSSION 1
PERCUSSION 2
PERCUSSION 3

ARADINE

GROUPS SUPPANO

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Princess and other voices. Conceived by Schafer.
COURTESY OF R. MURRAY SCHAFER

are cued with coloured flags (out of sight of the audience, of course), particularly the beautiful chorale-like passage during the departure of the gods and animals. And sometimes musicians simply respond to the positioning of the canoes: "I stop playing when the canoe gets *there*." Each musician also has a watch on site to keep track of the score's time log.

Wendy Humphreys (the Princess) detected suspicious noises and, not wanting to become "bear bait," equipped herself with a hatchet. ("Art is dangerous," Schafer told her.)

Performance conditions for the musicians involve being transported and left alone at a remote site in the black of night. The technical crew, the first on site, had a wake-up call of three a.m. A few musicians not accustomed to Schafer found this experience stressful; but all soon fitted themselves out with creature comforts: a tarp in case of rain, an extra sweater, a watch, a camp stool, a flask of tea. Wendy Humphreys, who sang the role of the Princess from the most remote spot of all, detected suspicious noises and, not wanting to become "bear bait," equipped herself with a hatchet. ("Art is dangerous," Schafer told her.) Because of the pre-dawn darkness, the first several "editing units" of *Princess* must be memorized, a challenge primarily for the Princess herself, with her intricate aria, and for the four percussionists.

Wendy Humphreys described to me two additional pieces of equipment. One was a six-foot megaphone, specially constructed and mounted on a stake so that she could swivel it and create various kinds of echo; the other, a C tuning fork. The aria begins on C and, though it is based on the *Patria* tone row,⁷ retains this pitch as a tonal referent. The aria is unaccompanied, but in reality it generates a density of echoes that fills the acoustic space. These echoes, Humphreys discovered, change pitch ever so slightly. The Princess sings her entire aria a second time, gradually joined by the sopranos and altos of the two quartets – with their echoes – imitating her phrases, so the challenge to her pitch orientation becomes even more complex.

Passages of the aria also suggest bird calls, and Humphreys found during rehearsals that she was attracting curious loons; she would sing a falling augmented fourth, and they would imitate. At the performance I witnessed, Nature intervened with magnificent effect. As the last tones of the soprano aria died away, a loon could be heard, faintly. (Humphreys encouraged it by adding a few extra phrases.) Such a finale could not have been scripted. We could only be grateful for it. □

Notes

1 I want to thank especially Sarah Jane Burton, Wendy Humphreys, Joe Macerollo, Kirk MacKenzie, Jerrard Smith, Ellen Waterman and Murray Schafer himself for their assistance with this article.

2 After *Princess*, the *Patria* cycle includes *Wolfman* (formerly called *The Characteristics Man*, 1974); *Requiems for the Party Girl* (1972); *The Greatest Show* (a fully staged modern carnival, 1987); *The Black Theatre of Hermes Trismegistos* (an alchemical marriage presented at midnight, 1988); *The Crown of Ariadne* (set in ancient Crete, 1982, 1991); *Ra* (an all-night dramatization based on the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, 1983); *Asterion* (in progress); *The Enchanted Forest* (1994); *The Spirit Garden* (1997); *The Palace of the Cinnabar Phoenix* (in progress); *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (see below). Schafer's books and scores are available from his own press, Arcana Editions, now located in Indian River, Ontario.

3 Schafer describes the work as "a week long event in the forest for any number of people who will camp there, and [who] under the guidance of expert musicians, dancers, actors, artists, and storytellers will prepare a ritual designed to reunite Wolf and the Princess of the Stars, and thus save the world from destruction" (qtd. in MacKenzie 21–2).

4 This volume collects Schafer's essays on *Patria* and drama theory.

5 Schafer's notes list some of the bird species present in the score: white-throated sparrow, whippoorwill, hermit thrush, black-capped chickadee, yellowthroat, red-breasted nuthatch.

6 Though never prevalent, this view has ancient precedent. "Elsewhere in the Bible," writes Robert Alter, "man is the crown of creation, little lower than the angels, expressly fashioned to rule over nature." But in Yahweh's answer to Job (chapters 38–41), "the natural world is valuable for itself, and man, far from standing at its centre, is present only by implication, peripherally and impotently, in this welter of fathomless forces and untamable beasts" (104).

7 For an account of this tone row, see my *R. Murray Schafer* (140–4).

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