

Winter 1-2014

Eco-Theatre

Sarah Ann Standing
CUNY New York City College of Technology

R. Murray Schafer

Eleanor James

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs

 Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Music Commons](#), and the [Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Standing, Sarah Ann, R. Murray Schafer, and Eleanor James. "Eco-Theatre." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 36.1 (2014): 35-44. <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/loi/pajj>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the New York City College of Technology at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

ECO-THEATRE

R. Murray Schafer and Eleanor James in conversation with Sarah Ann Standing

Born in Sarnia, Ontario, in 1933, and widely considered Canada's leading living composer, Raymond Murray Schafer is also a librettist, educator, writer, and "soundscape" theorist. Schafer composes for symphonies as well as chamber orchestras, solo instruments (he has even composed a piece for snowmobile), and vocalists. His compositions have played throughout the world. Schafer's operatic cycle *Patria*—a masterwork almost forty years in the making—consists of ten episodes, plus a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue *The Princess of the Stars* and epilogue *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (also known as the *Wolf Project*) comprise an eco-theatre where Schafer places his opera in the Canadian wilderness, and the wilderness is, in turn, directly incorporated into the work. The "*Wolf Project*" is a week-long camping and performance venture that seeks to erase the line between life and art. R. Murray Schafer's books include *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere*, *Patria: The Complete Cycle*, *The Tuning of the World: Toward a Theory of Soundscape Design*, *Wolf Tracks*, *On Canadian Music*, and *Ear Cleaning: Notes for an Experimental Music Course*. Schafer is married to Eleanor James, who was the leading mezzo-soprano at the City Opera of St. Gallen in Switzerland for six years, and then the leading mezzo-soprano at the Gartnerplatz Theatre in Munich, Germany for fourteen years. In 1983, James experienced the work of Murray Schafer, and they subsequently became frequent collaborators. I had the opportunity to speak first with Murray Schafer and then with Eleanor James at their home in Indian River, Ontario, on September 1 and 3, 2012.

What role does nature play in your work?

Any work of art has to fit in some kind of an environment, and we've created interior environments for the placement of works of art—art galleries, concert halls, or theatres. So what was once performed outside in natural environments is no longer, and that means that the whole relationship between the performer and the audience has changed in terms of what other kinds of sound are permitted or not permitted. In the silent concert hall the performance is isolated and kept in an environment like a refrigerator, taking things out when you need them and putting them back in again—that's our classical musical tradition. That's changing today, but the one thing that is missing in the urban environment is the presence of nature and the

contribution of natural sounds mixed with human sounds. That's a novelty today, and in fact it does not exist for most people at all—they're often frightened of the outdoors. We need to somehow put ourselves back in contact with nature and realize that we are nature's creatures too, so why don't we learn to participate with the sounds, the experiences, the sights, the smells of nature? This can be a very exciting experience.

How do you think it changes the audience's sense of participation when they're encountering music theatre or a concert outdoors? How does it shift things when you take music out of the "refrigerator"?

One is very much aware of being outdoors when the performance is outdoors. In my experience it will be raining on you today, or tomorrow, or the next day, so there is a way of getting excited about something that you don't normally want to experience. What we are basically doing is placing things back into a situation where we are making a contribution to nature instead of plundering nature.

Some of the things that we have done—the obvious work is *The Enchanted Forest [Patria, Episode Nine]*—is try to make us aware that nature can come to life all around us and become participants with us in the story. It's a children's story, but it is not limited to being a children's story. The story is about going into the forest to find a lost child, but at the end of the story we have not recovered the child. We discover that the child is there but will remain there. We respect that and will visit the child, and we will maintain the child and help keep it alive with parts of our memory. That kind of story makes us aware that nature is not hostile but is sometimes dangerous.

I am aware of the iconic photos of the production of The Princess of the Stars in Banff, which are extraordinarily beautiful. However, there aren't many images or video recordings of your music theatre work, to my knowledge. Is that deliberate, because you want people to come and experience the work directly?

It is partly deliberate. The work at Banff wasn't easy to accomplish. I had proposed *The Princess of the Stars*, and the people at Banff said their music students were there to learn to sing Schubert. The teachers were horrified at what I was proposing: getting up at four o'clock in the morning. They thought that the students would be eaten by bears or lose their voices in the cold air. We had produced this work before on a lake near Toronto, and I remembered the noise from the Toronto airport when the flights started going up at four o'clock in the morning, so was looking forward to the opportunity to work in Banff.

The Princess of the Stars really emphasizes our relationship with nature—you realize that when you see the sun rising and you see the sun coming on down-lake as a character in the drama. We're welcoming the sun as a character in our drama. All of the other creatures in the piece are ones you might expect to encounter in a forest or outside. There is a temporal relationship with the sun appearing at exactly the official moment of sunrise, and the whole work being geared to that time. So it would be

different if the sunrise were to be five o'clock in the morning or seven o'clock in the morning. It would be a different production, because nature is changing all the time.

I remember one time paddling in the rain with someone's double bass in a canoe at the Wolf Project. We were so worried about the instrument—and the musician said, "Yes, I'm probably going to have to take it apart and re-glue it when this is over." Your shows demand, and receive, incredible commitment from both performers and audiences.

The performers would come up to me afterwards and say: "That was the experience of a lifetime. Anytime you want to do it again, call me."

So it's clear that for everyone who is involved in the productions, it's a very moving experience. Your pieces awaken us to our connection with nature. Do they do anything for nature? Is nature happy that you're there?

In order to experience nature sometimes you just have to stand still. You don't experience it in a kind of pugilistic stance: you don't go in and tramp all over it and wreck it. We deal with nature by letting it speak for itself and letting all of the things that you come across in any performance happen. We're not here to destroy nature; we're here to encourage it and to let it teach us something. This allows us to have a very beautiful experience in that environment. We've had some very frightening moments too: we've had lightning and thunder when we're on the water. I don't think that's such a bad thing, it's just the experience of something that is constantly, subtly, changing from one thing to another. With the *Wolf Project*, as you know, we've had some accidents.

I remember there was always a concern about the use of cell phones on the Wolf Project—where you can get reception and also under what emergency circumstances they could be used.

I think—I hope—I managed to kill the camera that one year. I think I've worked hard to instill the idea that you don't need your technology, to leave those things at home and experience nature instead.

With the *Wolf Project*, we've chosen a place that is very isolated—it's not just some park with picnic benches all around. As you know the Halliburton Forest is miles away from anything and rarely have we even seen anyone else in that part of the park, so we can develop our chanting and our stories away from a public "performance." We isolate ourselves very deliberately and we are lucky to be able to do that through Peter Schleifenbaum [the owner of Halliburton Forest and Wildlife Reserve's 70,000 acres]. Early on, I gave Peter a German copy of [my book] *The Tuning of the World*, and he responded because he is trying to preserve an enormous piece of land—the biggest piece of private property in Ontario. I'm sure that that isn't easy; there are lots of people who want to develop that land. So we have things in common with Peter, and he has been very generous in allowing us to be in an environment that inspires us. People living in large cities now have no understanding of anything beyond in the wilderness.

What's dangerous about that?

Well, they have no experience with an enormous tract of land. So there is a big—not “war” but “disconnection” between urban people and rural people. Even here in Indian River, you wouldn't suspect it, but if you talk to the farmers you'll get a good lecture on why the hell we're killing all the farmland and what we're going to lose when we lose it. Art is dangerous, and we force people to take seriously what is happening to the environment in Canada. That's the big lesson that we are trying to teach humanity with the *Wolf Project*. We do expect that you show a certain amount of care in looking after yourself and other people. Now what you may learn is that you can't stand that environment and so we never see those people again. They go and live in New York City or something.

Can you speak about the sense of community in the Wolf Project where, as I recall, part of the goal is to erase the boundary between art and life?

You've phrased it properly: that is what we're attempting to do. There are people who have returned every year for twenty years or more.

Canada is the world's second largest country and yet has such a small population, most of whom live in the South. So, there are vast tracts of very sparsely populated land. It seems that this would give rise to a national call to respect the wilderness.

Well, I think there is a “call to respect the wilderness” by the few people who do live in the wilderness. But, I don't think it's very celebrated. I think the wilderness is frightening to people who live in cities. It is dangerous sometimes to live out in the forest.

In the *Wolf Project* a lot of quite beautiful music is being written—not just my own but by others as well—and it has stimulated people who have never written music in their life before, to write music. You don't have to do it, nobody says you have to sit around the campfire and tell a story every night or you'll be fired—there is no pressure of that kind. But it is just something that people seem to respond to and they decide for example, “Oh, I'll write a piece of music for the flute.” Then they want to know what it will sound like in that environment and so they paddle across the river in a canoe to hear it. The culture of the *Project* is that if we like something, we keep it. And if for some reason or other it's not up to the taste of everyone there, we abandon it. It's just an automatic thing. What is nice about the *Wolf Project* is that it has succeeded in attracting people of very different ages and backgrounds. It's not something that's exclusive: we don't say to anyone that you can't come because you can't swim—

Or even, “You don't sing well enough.”

Right, we'll give it a try.

One of the most beautiful things that I've ever experienced in my life is at the very end of the last night of the project. The story is that the Princess is a star constellation and the first thing we do at the beginning of the *Project* is to have a ritual where we bring her down to join us. What we do at the end is give her back up to the stars to preserve again until we come back. So, at the end, we've been sitting around the campfire where we have all kinds of games and laughter, and at a certain moment it's clear that it's time now to conclude everything. There is a song that is spontaneously started by someone. As we sing, we all go and sit on the cliff overlooking the long lake. Then, the Princess paddles down the lake slowly, singing all the way (we happen to have a coloratura soprano singing a very difficult twelve-tone piece that I wrote a long time ago). And we continue to hear the Princess's voice, even after we can't see her because it's very dark, and that goes on for about thirty or forty minutes. During that time, I've never seen anyone move or make a sound. Her voice continues to get softer and softer and you think, "Can I still hear it? Can I, or is that an echo? Oh. There." When that is finished, people slowly get up and there is no more talking for the rest of the night. People walk back to the campground in silence and get in their tents and go to sleep.

We've named the Corona Borealis the Princess's crown, because you can see the crown in the star formation, so every time you see the Corona Borealis you are reminded of the Princess. And it is seen on that last night when she is being escorted down the lake—she is going back up to the sky. Just as her voice fading is the last thing that you hear, the last thing you see is the crown of Ariadne, the Princess.

The goal of the project is to give simple things dignity again. You probably remember the Wheel of Life [a sacred space that is visited after meals for moments of quiet contemplation]. You walk around the wheel of life: there is a certain, ritualized, way to enter it. You have your own place in the Wheel, and you can stay there as long as you want. Everyone has their own simple way of doing something like that. Again, it's without any chatter. The gathering around a campfire is also not a time to get drunk and start shouting and screaming at your friends. But we had to make that a condition. Chatter just seems to be inappropriate when we are trying to find a place, an environment, a story, that you will return to each year and become an important episode in your life. However, there are some changes, and there will always be changes. For example, technology is different now. When we started you had to get together in order to communicate. There aren't so many meetings now. I don't know what happens on the Internet.

Because you still don't have a computer, do you?

No, I don't. I don't have the time for it.

You still have the meeting at Villiars, though, don't you?

Yes, but I had to force it. Villiars was at one time an overnight stay, and we had a campfire and went through the rituals, so that new people could get an idea of the

project and make a decision about joining. I think we survive as an organization because there's a lot of camaraderie. Everybody feels excited to be in the presence of everyone else. There's very little fighting. We had a tragedy this past year—one person got into some trouble and had to leave. But it was managed. Those things happen.

I want to return to talking about doing music in the wilderness and for the wilderness. You said it was something you wanted to explore for yourself. Can you say what it was that you wanted to explore? What were you doing out there? What drew you, and what problems or issues were you trying to get hold of?

I don't know. I lived in the city until I left Simon Frasier University. And then I bought a farm. I think I wanted to have more land around me, and more conversation with birds and animals, than was available in the city. That was just my life decision. You can very easily get trapped in a city. They were making me all kinds of offers: full professor, raise my salary. And the whole Soundscape research was really taking off. It is now worldwide. I would have had grad students and whatever I wanted and all kinds of pats on the back from the president. I think it surprised everyone when I wrote them a very funny letter, which is in my book *My Life on Earth and Elsewhere*.

At Simon Frasier University, we did things like the *Five Village Soundscape* in Europe. I took a team to Europe and we studied five villages in five different countries with more or less the same population and size. We studied the *acoustic environment* of those five villages—the activity and the sounds. It was the first real, comparative, study of the acoustic environment of different towns and villages. And twenty-five years later the Finns went back and did a similar study. So now we can compare the two and have an idea of what is really changing. We forget that sounds are changing all the time. We don't notice the changes until after they have already happened. Suddenly, there's a new sound and whether you want it or not, it's too late to do anything about it. So that was a very important program that we developed. And, of course the *Tuning of the World* has been translated into many different languages and has stimulated people into making changes.

For example, we saved a village from being totally destroyed by a highway. It was Lesconil, France, and it was announced that a big superhighway was going to be built right near the village. The fishermen were really worried because they said the sound of the highway would frighten away the fish. So we managed to get the subject in the big newspapers—*Le Monde* in Paris, for example—because of our research. We made a lot of publicity about the whole environment being ruined.

CONVERSATION WITH ELEANOR JAMES

What appeals to you so strongly about Murray's work and about Patria in particular?

Having been a trained opera singer and having sung on stages—beautifully controlled environments—most of my life (and then continuing to do so in between working with Murray), the first time I was with Murray we were at the Banff Centre, and he said, "Let's go out and sing in the woods." I said, "Oh, I don't know. Nobody

will be able to hear me. I won't be able to project." He said, "No, no, come on." So we found ourselves standing in the middle of a pine forest of some kind, and I just did some vocal exercises. It was like being inside a Stradivarius violin—so resonant! It was so easy! I was totally knocked over. I had not expected that because being on a stage is where resonance and projection are supposed to work best. And here I was standing out in the middle of the woods and it was just beautiful! So that was one little "ah ha" moment.

The Princess of the Stars in Banff was my first production with Murray, and I had already trusted that I could go outside and use my voice and not feel that my throat was endangered. It was an amazing—really mystical—experience singing that work (having been over a kilometer away from the audience, all by myself out on a little point, and then singing the Princess's aria). I had never had a stage like that in my life. And every time I did one of Murray's shows, the outdoor stage was a hundred times, a hundred thousand times, more interesting compared to a regular stage, and often equally, if not more, resonant. Your voice simply flows out over this huge distance because the temperature of the air at dawn or dusk carries it superbly. Also, I lost my fear of damaging my throat. I would wear a scarf when I was going out, but I didn't find singing at 5:00 A.M. any problem. Every time I performed, the element of unpredictability entered the scene—which made it exciting. On a stage they try to make sure the same thing happens every night, and that's very satisfying and assuring. But in a Murray Schafer production, you really don't know what you're going to be up against that night. And even if the weather is beautiful every night in a row, it's still a completely different show because the atmosphere, the color, the mist on the water (or no mist on the water), having a moon or not, the different animals that will come by are completely unpredictable. Sometimes it gets especially unpredictable if there is a storm threatening off in the background.

One time we were performing *The Enchanted Forest* at Halliburton Forest and the lights that were supposed to focus on my scene didn't work. But then the Northern Lights came on in the sky: it was spectacular and totally amazing! No other stage can do this! These experiences completely sold me on being involved in such productions—the cooperation with nature (which doesn't always work; when nature gets the upper hand sometimes we have to cancel the show). On the other hand, there is the feeling of not being in total control. When you get into a Murray Schafer show, it's a cooperation, so you feel very differently. As an opera singer, you feel that "I am doing this," even though that's a little simplistic. You believe that "the big aria is coming, and it's all on my shoulders." With a Schafer show, it's not just *you* anymore—you are cooperating and you feel lifted and freed because it's not just me. It's me and the universe.

I have read that the temperature of the water affects the speed at which the sound travels over it—and of course we're talking about such great distances (sometimes a half a mile or more—and the singers are not electronically amplified) that the speed of sound does become a factor in the performance.

Murray has done his research so he knows what will work for the singer—unless it's pouring rain. And usually at the time of day for the performance there is no wind. Wind is a great interference with music. The wind is a wonderful spiritual symbol, but singing against the wind is not going to do any good. If you're singing at certain times of dawn and dusk, the solar winds have died down and, normally, there's a great stillness. That, combined with the temperature of the water makes a resonance situation.

Is that why he so often writes for dawn or dusk?

Yes!

Or is it because it's such an amazingly magical time of day?

It's both things. In the middle of the afternoon, you really are up against winds and very bright light. If you go into the depths of the forest in the middle of the afternoon things can be more cooperative, but even then you can get winds and it's hard to compete with them. Getting up at 3:00 A.M. is also extremely challenging but once you're out there and you're warmed up and awake and you've got your little thermos of coffee, you feel pretty courageous and adventurous. One year singing *The Princess* in *Princess of the Stars*, I had yellow rain gear on (because no one could see me) because it was a damp misty kind of morning. I really needed my coffee to dispel the chill.

So you were playing the Princess in yellow rain gear?

Yes, no one can see you because you're over a kilometer away around the bend. I remember specifically that Banff was so wonderful because the echoes were phenomenal. There were two or three echoes bouncing off the Princess's aria, and singing under those conditions really makes you feel that you are cooperating with nature. It's indescribable. When you sing an opera aria in a theatre, you feel the resonance of that particular theatre: there's no echo, of course. They don't want an echo. There always a kind of pressure to make sure that everything is perfect. But with *The Princess of the Stars*, we were timing the aria to go with the echo cooperating.

I was once performing in the *Wolf Project*, doing one of the encounters in the evening, and I had on a white stag's antlers. I was alone on a rock for a long time waiting for people to arrive, and this little frog came out of the water and just looked at me. Just looked and looked for the longest time—even when I was singing—he just stared at me. And another time when I was playing Earth Mother, a different frog looked up at me as if to say, "You great, green Goddess, I worship you." I was wearing a huge dress like a parachute out on the water and also an enormous headdress, which seemed to connect me from the sky down to the water, and then there was this little frog at my feet. It was absolutely special—you just don't get that in a regular theatre.

There is something about the realness of Murray's work, isn't there? In the theatre, we work with artifice and it's all designed to look like something else. Yet, there's something moving and powerful about the realness—the real environment, the real frog—in performance. Why is that so powerful?

Well I suppose it is because artifice is a human construction. I think for contemporary people living in this high, high-tech world, we are basically obsessed with our own sense of control to the point where we really forget about anything else, including God. God is irrelevant because we're in control. That's a delusion of course, but it's a very powerful delusion, and theatre continues to perpetuate that illusion, in the sense that we create it all—we script it, we act it, and we put in all the tech. The more high-tech it is, in some cases, the more exciting it is for some people. But it's all about *us* doing everything. And then in Murray's shows, it's not about us doing everything anymore. It's really about cooperation, and seeing your place in the universe in a humbler perspective. It's very humbling to be totally rained on—just drenched to the skin—and to say, "Yes, we're still going to do the show. Lightning didn't strike, so we're still going to continue."

So you're saying that outdoors you're not the only star, even if you're the leading role. It's the light, the sunrise, the mountains, and the lake. It's the trail of the canoe—that lighted part in contrast to the dark of the rest of the lake—all of these things are also stars of the show.

Everybody has their role to play and it's somehow much more obvious that everything works together. With the *Wolf Project*, for example, there are no stars. Even the person who does the "Princess" aria at the end of the event doesn't really feel like a star. You feel you gave something, you offered it, and of course you are recognized and people are happy somebody did it, but all the people who got the food ready for the banquet that night, and all the people who are good at canoeing people around—without them nothing would happen.

My recollection is that people take on tasks that they have proficiency in, but also that someone can be given something to do that they have dreamed of doing but have never done before. People are encouraged to try new things. I wonder if that has worked against Murray's reputation in some ways because we are so groomed for an expectation of exquisite virtuosity in the theatre. How do you reconcile that?

His reputation hasn't been altered. He's won every prize that you can win, and he's recognized as Canada's top composer. He's iconic. He speaks for the wilderness. But, when it comes to people getting behind and producing, that's where the little element of suspicion arises because, as I said before, most producers want control, as we all do in this society. So when they think of a Murray Schafer show, they think of entering into seeming chaos with regard to weather, and that's what works against him. It doesn't affect his reputation in terms of his talent, or abilities, or what he's trying to do, but it affects the practical working out of the productions. Everyone knows that he writes symphonies and has chamber music coming out of his ears (forgive

the pun), so it's not a question of reputation, it's a question of people not wanting to give up control, of having to risk failure. And it's a bad time for that because, as things get higher and higher tech, and more urban, his vision is definitely being marginalized. A prophet is always a voice calling from the wilderness. But, in the long run, they are often proven right.

SARAH ANN STANDING has participated in the *Wolf Project* four times (1995, 1997, 2001, 2002). She is currently a fellow at the Center for Place, Culture and Politics at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, an assistant professor of humanities at New York City College of Technology (CUNY), and a contributor to *Readings in Performance and Ecology*. She has published articles in *Theatre Topics*, *The O'Neill Review*, *American Theatre*, and *Terra Nova*. An actor and director, Standing has also created *Telling Our Stories*, a multicultural theatrical investigation into the relationship between environment, heritage, and location.

Support for this project was provided by a PSC-CUNY Award, jointly funded by the Professional Staff Congress and the City University of New York.