

An Anvil, a Coil, a Patterned Ocean... a Voice

a response by Beth Graham

What if you were sitting in a theatre in Edmonton waiting for a performance to begin?

What if that performance was called *An Anvil, a Coil, a Patterned Ocean*?

What if the show featured a trio of performers from Regina?

What if the set for the show was an installation designed by renowned Canadian artist, Betty Goodwin?

What if Betty had originally designed the set in 1993 for an entirely different piece called *Bras de plomb*?

What if her set had been resurrected and used as inspiration for this new performance piece?

What if you didn't know much about Betty Goodwin? Only what you remembered from a documentary years ago—that she was a painter, a sculptor, who had lost a son to drugs, an overdose.

What if it felt like the set was haunted?

What if, suddenly, out of nowhere, a red-haired woman, in a quilted vest, with large owl-like glasses, appeared for a moment in the seat beside you, and then disappeared into thin air?

What if she appeared again on the other side of you, white-haired this time, still wearing the same vest and glasses, and then vanished once more?

What if you somehow knew this apparition



in the quilted vest and large glasses with the red, then white, hair was Betty Goodwin?

What if this was impossible?

Because...

What would Betty Goodwin be doing in Edmonton?

She's from Montreal, after all. She's a world-renowned artist.

Oh, and she's dead. She's been dead for decades... Decades.

What if the lights started to go down in the theatre? What if you felt like you were teetering on the edge of an abyss? What if the air smelled earthy and damp?

What if you thought about your own mortality for a moment?

What if, as the performance began, you heard a voice inside of your head?

What if that voice wasn't your own?

What if... what if... what if it was Betty's voice, speaking her thoughts aloud inside your head as you watched the show?

...

Betty: That's my set, you know? My set, mine, made from steel, wood, aluminum, painted... what colour would you say it was? Some would call it rust. I'd say it was burnt orange—the colour of fall leaves, of drying blood, of longing. The colour of my hair when I was younger. Those performers that you see up there, the two men and the woman, were *awestruck* by my set when



they first encountered it. I could tell. They gazed at it with reverence. A gravestone. Here lies Betty Goodwin. Here lies... never mind. Awestruck, and yet their curiosity got the better of them. Their artistry took hold, and they couldn't help but invent. Good for them. One must answer the call. One must be tenacious. I've given the performers names. I call them the Technician, the Runner, and the String. The Technician is the one in the dress shirt with the intent look on his face, unfurling the cord, his mind tick-ticking. The Runner is the one who will soon be running round and round the stage in an endless loop. His movement will describe the expanse and limitations of the space. The String is the woman. I call her the String because she will move, impossibly, like a



piece of string; you'll see. The three of them begin their show by taking the set, *my set*, apart, piece by beautiful piece—the tall chair, the platform, the wall, two small tables, the long bench, the box, all moved out of place, until I hardly recognize it—deconstructed before my very eyes! What have they done to my set? Oh! The nerve! How dare they?! Now, they're setting up lights and microphones on the tall chair, under the platform, inside the box, at the front of the stage, transforming the installation, asserting themselves, taking ownership—the cheek!

There is no music in this piece, only footsteps, breath, silence, and then the amplified sounds of the performers' bodies on the set, hands and torsos against metal, metal against metal, sliding, scraping, tapping, echoing. We hear the set, my set, speak! It has a lot to say about... about what? Loss? Imprisonment? Humanity's dysfunction? You tell me. The String responds to the sound. She twists and swivels and shakes and falls, smearing her face across the platform. All the while, a steady, rhythmic metallic pulse, the heartbeat of my set, reverberates. Can you hear it? The relationship between the performers is distant and strained.



*Memories and dreams.
Back and forth.
Pushing and pulling.
Wonderful torture.
This is what it is
to be haunted.*

The deconstructed set and industrial sound feed this tension. There is no story. There isn't meant to be. Stop looking for one! Dancers are like visual artists. Abstract.

Responsive. Intuitive. Emotional... The audience, you and I, can have our own interpretation, invent our own stories, feel our own feelings. I think of who I was, over thirty years ago, when I designed this set—a grieving mother, a lost daughter, a ravenous artist. I think of my son, Paul, and of my father. They are everywhere and nowhere. Gone too soon. That's what happens when

time passes—people disappear. That's the disorder of things. There are moments of connection between the performers, a touch, a hold, a lift. But mostly they wind up grasping air, clutching emptiness, constantly chasing, reaching. For who? For me? For a ghost? For you? Their audience? For what? Inspiration? We are all of us reaching for something, trying to understand. A collective desire. The sound interrupts our thoughts, changes them, pulls us back to the present and then we're gone again into the past and future. Memories and dreams. Back and forth. Pushing and pulling. Wonderful torture. This is what it is to be haunted.

The performers loop, and run, and spin, then slow and stop and settle. The technician sits motionless on a long bench at the back of the stage, appearing impossibly far away, terribly alone. The Runner and the String turn off the

lights one by one. The sound continues in the darkness. Together, the ghosts and the living float and swim and drown in the abyss for a final moment. When the lights come up, I will be gone. Was I ever here? The set, my set, will remain. ■

