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Talking union: Acting on unemployment

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TALKING UNION

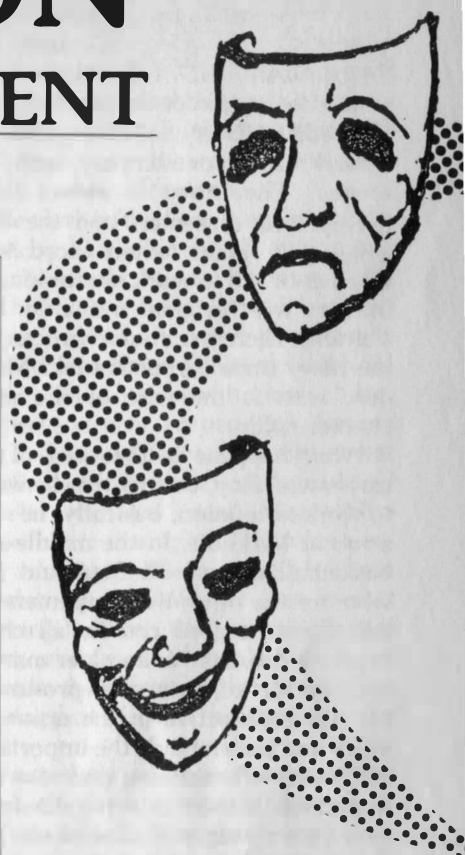
ACTING ON UNEMPLOYMENT

SARA DIAMOND

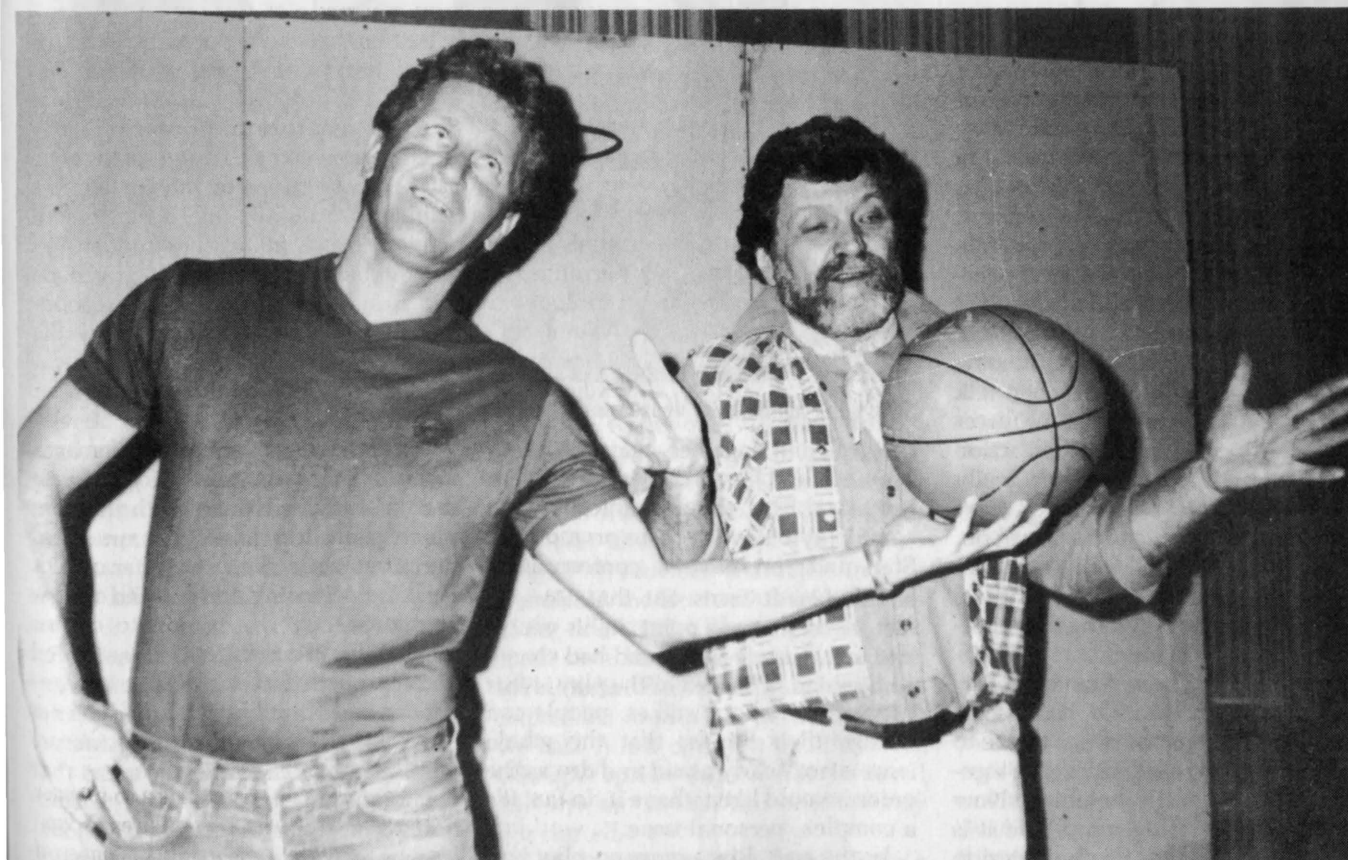
TALKING UNION IS A ONE ACT PLAY ABOUT unemployment, written by Chryse Gibson of the Carpenters' Union L.U. 452, with original music by Phil Vernon, of the same local. It has played to over 2,000 people in British Columbia's Lower Mainland, at performances sponsored by both the Carpenters' Union and the C.L.C. The production is directed by Suzie Payne.

Fundraising is now underway to make a videotape of the production and to workshop and tour it through the province. Chryse is currently teaching carpentry at the Carpenters' Union and the Nicaraguan government.

Sara Diamond spoke with Chryse Gibson and Phil Vernon about the creation and production of *Talking Union* and of its music.



CRAG BERGOLD



Marcel Maillard (left) and Dick Clements perform at C.L.C.'s Winter School in Harrison, B.C.

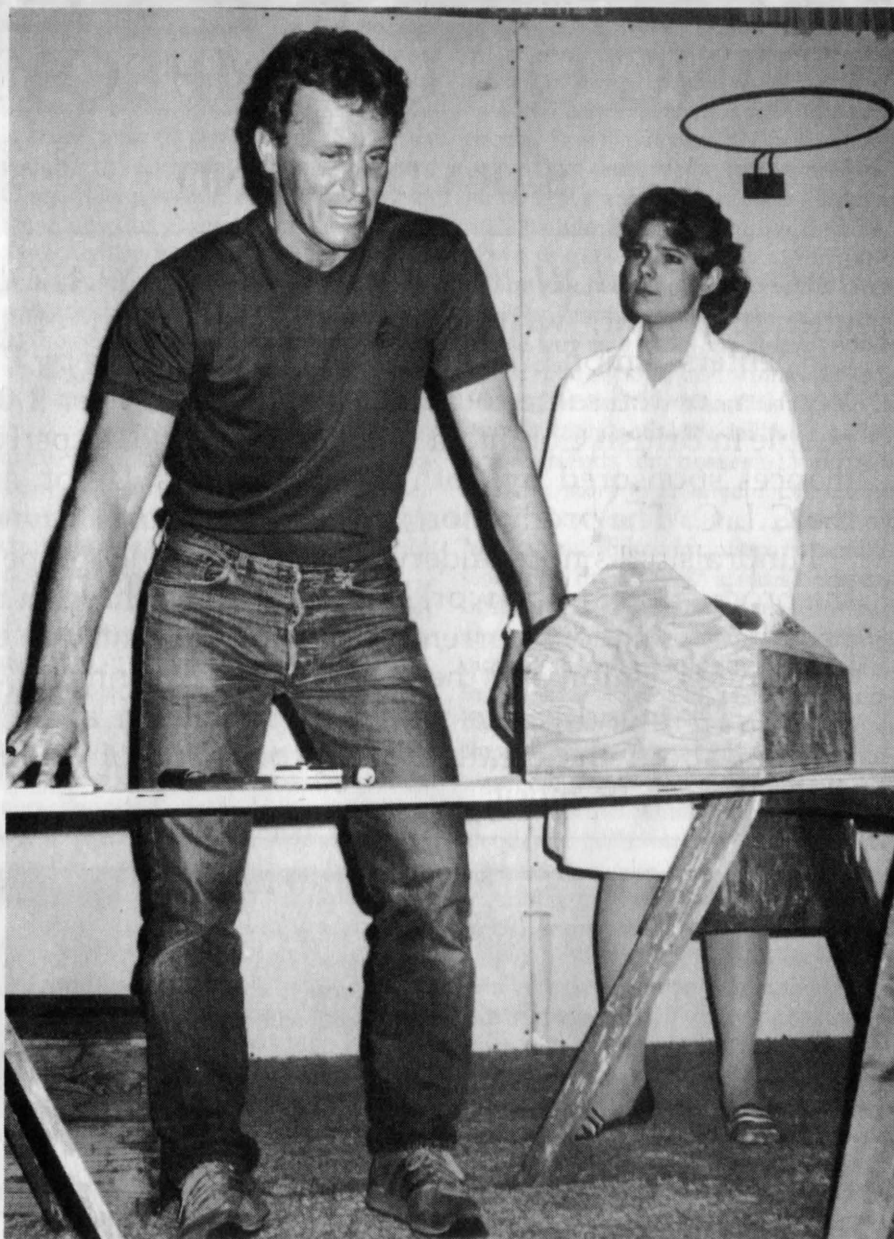
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRYSE GIBSON

SARA DIAMOND: Could you begin with a description of the play?

CHRYSE GIBSON: *Talking Union* is a thirty minute, one act play, with four scenes. The story is about three unemployed carpenters and the decisions they make when faced with whether or not to work non-union. It's intercut with original music by Phil Vernon. There are four characters in the play, three carpenters and Monique, who is the wife of the main character, Jim.

What happens is that one of the carpenters, Roy, decides that he wants to work non-union, basically, he's got a job at Kerkhoff. In the middle of a basketball game with Stan and Jim, who are the other two carpenters, he tells them, and of course, all chaos breaks loose. Stan is an older man, in his late forties, he's very pro-union. He has been active in the union for years and understands the importance of collective bargaining and also that non-union is used to drive down the benefits and wages of all workers. Jim, on the other hand, who's our main character, and our married carpenter, is not so sure. He's been out of work; he's depressed; he feels somewhat hopeless at this point, and the idea of just being able to go back to work again is very interesting to him. Jim then approaches his wife, Monique, with what he's going to do, as she is coming home from work. They talk about what having been a union carpenter has meant in his life, about the fact that she is forced to work non-union because her particular nursing home is not unionized yet. They talk about the issue of safety, and she forces him to really consider what his action will mean, and he forces her to really listen to his fear, because he's very afraid. He's lost his dignity as a person. He feels useless and like he's not contributing to society in general, that as a family man he's not fulfilling the expectations of a breadwinner.

Then in Scene Three, Stan comes by to talk to him and through their discussion Jim decides that he doesn't have to work non-union, that instead he's going to get active with the union. Now that sounds like a big jump, and it is one. A lot of it is done through tension and body language. In the last scene



Struggling against the depression of unemployment

they all join together again — Stan, Monique and Jim. It comes out that Jim has asked Roy, the non-union kid, to come play ball with them on a picnic. Stan and Jim have a confrontation about this. It turns out that Stan, in fact, himself at one point, in his youth, had worked non-union and had changed his mind. The idea of the play is that people do make mistakes, people can change their minds, that the whole issue is not nearly as cut and dry as the unions would like to have it. In fact it's a complex, personal issue.

In the end, Roy comes to play ball with them and we're never quite sure

whether or not he decides to come back into the union or not. We just know that he's having trouble with the non-union route; the lines of communication are open again.

SARA: Who is Kerkhoff and why is he relevant?

CHRYSE: Kerkhoff is mentioned because of the recent situation in Vancouver and Kamloops. He had been a fairly small, non-union contractor, who has now leapt into the areas that the unions have basically held jurisdiction over — larger commercial jobs. He was recently awarded major, major contracts totalling millions of dollars,

at the Harbour Cove, which is Pennyfarthing Construction, and at EXPO and the Kamloops Courthouse. It was a confrontation situation. The unions opposed him at Pennyfarthing and lost to the courts. Kerkhoff, we feel, has quite a bit of backing now and is being used consciously to bust the union hold on construction work. That's why the specific reference in the play.

SARA: Why did you choose those characters?

CHRYSE: First of all, I should make it clear, I have never written a play before, and never expect to write one again. I wrote it because I wasn't working, and like Jim, the character, I felt useless. I had felt that there was no way to express my fear and my despair; writing the play was one way that I could do it.

The characters are composites of my peers. In fact, for the basketball scene, much of the dialogue was literally lifted from a conversation that three of us, in a drunken stupor, were having at a party to celebrate one of our friends getting his journeypapers. We were talking about how far we would go to keep a job. These are all political activists in the union, but it really got to be quite obvious that we'd go to great lengths to keep a job. We laughed, but in fact, we all want to work. And that's where the characters come from, from people I know.

SARA: The characters in the play are all men, and you're a woman carpenter. Why did you choose to use only male characters for the construction workers?

CHRYSE: There are, I believe, 33 women in the Carpenters' Union out of a membership of 30,000, and my intent was to discuss the issue of the despair that you feel when you are unemployed. I felt that to use a woman would distract from that issue. When we were doing the casting, we discussed trying to find an East Indian or a Chinese person to play the roles, and unfortunately, the characters are so clear, it's like a good guy and a bad guy and an in-between guy. You would end up getting all involved with racism and everything else. It's a real criticism I have of the play and I don't know how to get out of it. And just to throw a woman in on top of it all wouldn't work.

SARA: It might have made the emotional aspects of the political questions seem sex-specific.

CHRYSE: Something that I did do with Monique, is that she's very much a role model, in her strength and conviction and her commitment to certain political ideas. Also, she's working and he isn't. She very much orchestrates the environment so that he is comfortable expressing himself without her mothering him or putting him down. That was where my own personal view on the importance of strong women comes through.

And she's a nurse — that was a specific decision on my part. Because as a tradeswoman we often are romanticized and our life sucks as much as anybody else's. Unfortunately, a nurse, because it's a traditional female role, isn't seen as someone to look towards for strength and I think that's unfortunate.

SARA: Why did you decide to work with theatre as a form? How did you proceed once you had chosen the medium?

CHRYSE: That's actually quite a story. I'm on the action committee for the local, and most of us are unemployed — we had some suicides in the local and a great deal of despair. It became obvious that a social function might be really good as a way to bring people together. Everyone's poor and people aren't able to go and spend the evening out, so we thought, "Gee, let's make a social evening." We got the other local, Carpenters' Local 1251, to help us out and we thought we'd have a cabaret. It's a lot of work to put together a cabaret, so that didn't really look like it was going to happen. Then we decided, "Let's do a short play and have a dance afterwards."

We started looking for plays. And we looked, and looked for plays and didn't like any of them. So I said, "I want to write one." That's how it started. The first play that was written I did with Mickey McKuen from the postal workers' union (CUPW). That play was about two and a half hours long, with fourteen characters in it. It was about the On-to-Ottawa trek, and about the 1980s, flipping back and forth — a historical docudrama with multimedia. But, I realized that it was impossible to produce in the time that we had. A few of us felt that the 1980s was appropriate (which was the part I had written) so that was how the play got started.

I had this belief that there's quite a bit of talent, amongst the rank and file

members. Sure, we're carpenters for a living, but most people have other interests, hobbies, whatever. And I felt that there were people out there who were interested in theatre and sure enough there were. But their being interested and actually getting them onto the stage were two different things, which I soon discovered.

We were in the final hour before the publicity had to go out for the cabaret and the whole play fell through, there was nobody to do anything. The director pooped out, the actors pooped out. I called Headlines Theatre, which I'd heard about, but knew nothing about. I called a woman named Suzie Payne, and right away I got the script to her and Suzie really liked it and she called people who she knew. Meanwhile, Micki had come up with Sandra Gossen, who plays Monique and is also a member of CUPW. She was in fact working fulltime and in the play at night, whereas other people were trying to make their living in the theatre. The exciting part of it was that they did it for free.

You've got to understand that my local, they're a great bunch of guys, but when I told them that we were going to do theatre, they said, "Well, okay, whatever." Believe me, there were no great expectations. You could say that the evening was not pushed as strongly as it could have been, which was just as well, because it was standing room only by the time it got going.

We put the show on and it blew the minds of the union executive and activists. From then on there was a lot of support. It was an exhilarating evening. The audience participation was excellent; most of the audience were carpenters and it was a play about them! It was also exciting for the actors. They're not used to having people booing and cheering and clapping. Later on, somebody said to me that they imagined that at least 80% of that audience had never seen a play, except for maybe one with their kids.

SARA: Did you use any material from the tradition of the workers' theatre of the 1930s in B.C. and other places?

CHRYSE: Once we decided that we were going to do this I got a job! Here I was writing this play about unemployment and I was working fulltime. It was ludicrous. I didn't have as much time to research as I wished. When I read the plays in *Eight Men Speak* they



Sandra Gossen as Monique "orchestrates the environment...without mothering him or putting him down."

seemed very timely for that period. I said to myself, "I can probably get out something that's this good about today." It gave me the confidence to write. But this play is much less rhetorical, there is a real attempt to expose the concepts through personal interactions and through what people are thinking, rather than what they are putting out in public.

Something that was really important to me in writing this was that men in this society and construction people in particular, are discouraged from expressing themselves on a more internal level. That's part of why there's a lot of family problems right now, in families of construction workers. The man has never been encouraged to say what's on his mind and partners and spouses aren't encouraged to talk it through. There's so many stereotypes about what the breadwinner's expected to do, it's very hard to admit you're not doing it; to figure out why; to figure out why you feel so shitty and to get it out to somebody else.

One of the objectives of the play is to say, "It's okay to be scared, you're not the only one." In fact, one of the lines in the play is, "What makes you think you're so special, we're all scared to death of that first job." We're all scared of losing our skills and our ability to produce and we're all scared of getting fired from a job. Another aspect of the

play is to say to the spouses (in my case it's the husband, but I'm unusual), that there's more to the situation than simply not wanting to work. There's a lot more and it should be talked about.

SARA: Can you comment on the end of the play? You take a guy who's saying, "I might work non-union, I don't know what to do," and moving him to where he is able to talk about his dilemma. The solution you pose though, is to get involved with the union and the unemployed committee. Is this not too simple?

CHRYSE: I wrote the ending twice, actually. I wanted the ending to be more ambiguous, at least with Roy, the guy who decided to go non-union. I'm not a playwright and I didn't know how to do it, I'm sure there are techniques. One of the problems of the play is that there's been no movement over the months that we've been performing it, in terms of improvement.

For me, I got involved with my union and it was a real lifesaver. I had moved out here and didn't know anyone and had transferred my union membership. For me it was a community that I could fit into and could easily become active in, and the committee was a lifesaver for some of my peers. It felt like you were contributing. It also felt like you were taking an active role in changing your situation as opposed to only reacting to

your situation. For my peers, and I'm thinking of people in their late twenties to their late thirties, it was really an important move forward. Unfortunately, the unions are being really brutally battered, specifically the building trades and that has rendered us ineffective as an organized body.

The play does say that the Unemployed Action Centre is just one way; it says to participate, to get involved. A lot of people sit back and make good criticisms but they don't come and make public their criticism. You can criticize the unions for not providing an environment for these concerns, on the other hand, you have to criticize the rank and file for not being willing to stick their necks out. Whatever you're going to do, stand up and say it. Deal with it!

SARA: Where has it been performed so far?

CHRYSE: The first performance was at the Carpenters' Cabaret for two locals and friends in the Lower Mainland. The next time we showed it was at the Provincial Council of Carpenters. The Provincial's been very supportive of the play; we sent out invitations to forty labour, political and cultural leaders in the Lower Mainland to come and join us for wine and cheese, a kind of showcase, hoping to get requests for the play. We did a show for the annual convention of the B.C. and Yukon Building Trades Council convention. Out of it we got four performances at the Canadian Labour Congress' winter school at Harrison Hot Springs. And all of the performances, with the exception of the first one, have been paid for.

SARA: The CLC performances are significant because that's beyond the building trades. Is the play general enough to communicate to this audience?

CHRYSE: People have not had to be a member of the Building Trades to appreciate frank discussion about unemployment. I would like to see the play expanded to a three act piece and that would mean throwing in a couple of more characters. Through those we could include other unions.

Out of the success of the play has developed the feeling that culture is an extremely effective tool in education and propaganda. This play could be termed agit-prop. I want to make it real clear that it is not going to make any inroads into drama, it's never going to push forward the concept of

theatre; it's a very particular genre and it fulfills that function. It encourages people who always thought that culture was an excellent tool for education to go ahead and say it, to use the play as an example and to push the idea.

We would all like to take it on tour because we feel that a critical part of the play is that it's live. We see it as a catalyst. We're sending out kits suggesting how people could use it in their community. You could use it to introduce a social evening, you could use it as part of a workshop and a discussion after, to talk about unemployment or non-union work.

We've been approached by diverse union groups to videotape it. We've been dragging our feet because we feel that it will lose a lot of impact as a video. We have a promo tape that's about ten minutes and it looks good — it's kind of soap opera-ish to be honest — but it will really lose a lot of its impact. We're hoping to be able to workshop it and tour it.

I had a response to the earlier discussion of the 1930s. I feel, and a number of cultural people in the unions feel, that a 1980s recession-culture is emerging out of British Columbia. At our convention a number of people, for example, musicians from Dawson Creek, came up to me and said, "I'm writing

all this music and I can't find a place to play it." So we were thinking that we could encourage communities to use the play for part of an evening and then get their own cultural workers to perform. Then we could record and document that person's work and take it with us. As we went from town to town, we'd become like a bee that was pollinating — developing a network. SARA: Do you think that new technologies make that possible in a way that didn't exist in the past where you would have to rely on oral culture or the migration of workers?

CHRYSE: We don't see that migratory sense of movement now, what we see is T.V. If we can use that technology it would be really good.

SARA: One of the things that's different about folk or popular culture as opposed to mass culture is that it's specific, rather than general. The limits of it are also that people in another area or industry might not relate to it. But because it is specific, it can educate people who are compatible in some way, about other people's conditions. It will be valuable to see where the play connects, who can relate to it, where people gain the most solidarity and how this varies.

We've talked mostly about union involvement so far, what role have

theatre professionals played in the production?

CHRYSE: They made necessary contacts for us. David Diamond [of Headlines Theatre] put together a tour budget which unfortunately we haven't yet been able to use, but we will!

Getting paid has been an interesting issue. Culture is not recognized as a skill in our society, so it's very interesting to convince my union not to encourage non-union production (which is what this is right now) and to pay union scale. We've gotten to the point where that's happening although we have no formal affiliations with ACTRA or Equity. We're basing our request for money on their scale.

We did the promo tape through the B.C. Institute of Technology studio and because of the nature of the play it automatically encourages people to discuss the issues that are in it. Most people at BCIT have no other exposure to our issues. We all ended up sitting down, and got into this lengthy discussion about union versus non-union, and how the unions are functioning. We've made a lot of people rethink construction workers' reputation in the world. It's been really nice to talk to people as human beings as opposed to the stereotype of sexist pigs whistling at women on the street.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHIL VERNON

SARA DIAMOND: At what point did you become involved with developing the play?

PHIL VERNON: In the spring of last year when Chryse said that she wanted to write a play, to do with the situation in the '30s and the situation now in the '80s with longterm unemployment. She asked if I would get some songs together, both historical songs for the '30s, and also the songs for the '80s. She had in mind a song that is in the play right now called *Murder*, which deals with an accident in downtown Vancouver, a number of years back.

Chryse wrote one scene that was built around *Murder* and then she asked me what I could do about the rest of the play. At that point I was in the midst of writing a song about construction that was the balance (at least in my own mind) of the other song. *Murder* was not something that I felt

good about singing everyday as I worked on a high rise, especially as it got higher and higher. The song *Concrete Fever* is a more positive description of heavy construction work and it was initially the lead-in for the play.

SARA: Had you performed at all for the union?

PHIL: I had, the previous year, taken my guitar along to a convention and sat in a side room and played. I guess they got me to sing *Solidarity Forever* when they found out that I could sing, at the end of the convention.

SARA: You mentioned that *Murder* was based on an accident in Vancouver. Could you describe what took place?

PHIL: About three years ago, on the construction of Bentall Four, they were up thirty-six floors doing alterations on the forms — that often hap-

pens when you get to the final floor at the top — and the form tipped when there were four men on top. The form didn't actually fall, but it threw the men down thirty-six floors and there wasn't a whole lot left of them. It's an important event, not just because of the deaths, because deaths happen all the time. It sparked an investigation into the safety of form work in the province.

It was a time of high employment, the one boom period that we've had in the last little while, so we did have the power at the time to push for a safety investigation. We found that more than 40% of formwork in the province was under-built — that is, not safe. About a week afterwards, there was a similar incident in Alberta. It really focused attention on form work.

Certain regulations were brought

in. Under our present agreement, all formwork and falsework (which is what holds the concrete in place until it is set) has to be engineered; it has to have an engineer's signature on it. The plans have to be available to all the workers on a site; so that, supposedly, anybody could demand to see the plans for such-and-such a form, see if it has a signature on it and ask how it works. Those were definitely steps forward.

Now, when times are tougher and everybody, including Job Standards, are covering their asses, it's harder to enforce that part of the agreement. There's still danger — particularly with members who are not experienced with fly forms.

SARA: You've described the music a bit. What role does it fulfill in the play?

PHIL: The way the play was first presented it started with *Concrete Fever* and then there was a scene and then I did a little short song, which I wrote as a transition piece basically. Then there was *Murder* in the next scene and I just had some instrumental piece. The music was not particularly strong and in fact it dwindled as the play went on.

The song that I wrote specifically for the play is called *What Does It Take*. It's a transition between Scenes One and Two. It describes a person sitting and wondering, "How am I going to get back to work, what am I going to do, what does it take," questioning, "What am I as a man, what does it take to be a man, what does it take to break me and what does it take to understand this situation?" Asking some pretty big questions and then, hopefully, the plan answers them or, at least, it presents more aspects of a situation, so that the audience is asked the questions. The play hopefully does not answer everything but poses some questions.

Now, in the performances that we've done at Harrison (CLC), I do a fifteen minute set on my own, ending with *Concrete Fever*. The songs set the stage, not only in terms of construction, but with songs about unemployment, about solidarity with Nicaragua, about union organizing, about hassling with your fellow workers about racism, setting an overall theme as to what's going on these days in our fights as labour.

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Then I go into the *What Does It Take* song, focusing on the personal situation of somebody who's out of work. My sense of the play is that it has a very personal focus within a larger social, economic, political setting. What I've wanted to do with the music is go deeper into that personal, emotional space. In the play, it would be melodramatic to have these outpourings of emotion, angst. It is in some ways more appropriate and more able to be heard coming through music. I'm not putting the words into anybody's mouth, they're not from a particular character. I almost play the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy. I restate things from a slightly different perspective.

I find that the songs that speak the truest come from a particular personal viewpoint for me — when I'm speaking out of my own experience, or an experience that I shared with others. It's better than if I'm trying to describe somebody else's situation or 'let's all get together and smash the state.'

In Part Two of *What Does It Take?*, I get into the nitty-gritty of personal experience. This goes from Scene One (the argument between friends) and Scene Two, where the carpenter is in turmoil and is telling his wife that he wants to work non-union because he's going crazy. So the song sets a depth of anger and self-hatred and frustration before that scene.

Later, at the end of the play, after the oldtimer has persuaded Jim to stay in the union, we needed a transition to the last scene where everything is just wonderful and they get a picnic together and they're "sticking to the union" — except for this one enigmatic character, Roy. That was a tough part for me. I rewrote it a couple of times because I was finding it really difficult to make this leap. It was not necessarily believable that somebody planning to go to work with Kerkhoff would end up working on the unemployed

committee and "rah, rah, we're all a team." I thought that was a little bit 'socialist realist', even though it wasn't Chryse's intent to write that kind of play. She's trying to leave it up in the air whether Roy is going to be with the union. And I was trying to make it less clear that Jim himself was 100% behind what he was doing in the union. Although on the surface everything's great, he's still unemployed, he's still out of work and I know from my experience in the union that you cannot make those changes 100%.

The union is not a perfect organization; there are power struggles and there's the use and abuse of the members. Even though I belong to one of the most progressive unions in the province, it's not a message that I particularly want to put out: that unions are the answer to everything.

This song is the most important transition, of somebody going through being unemployed, and wanting to do something that was right and still feel good about himself, to feel that he can be active: this is central to the problem of unemployment and breaking out of the isolation.

The first time I wrote it, it had to do with, "They can't keep me down." But it was just too, "everything is fine", the last scene was even more unreal. So I tried to tone it down and it still wasn't good enough. I worked on it for a week and what I ended up with was something similar in tone to the first transition.

I find sometimes when I'm writing this stuff about "I ain't down yet and I ain't gonna let it get me down and I'm gonna stay with the union" that I have a lot of feelings. I was crying when I put those words together and sang them. But I've realized that the emotion and the tears do not necessarily mean that it's true. It may simply mean that it's something that I really want. There's lots of songs on the market that are really strong tearjerkers and people have really strong feelings about them. It doesn't mean that they speak of our experience; they tap into some of our needs and feelings, but it doesn't mean that they're true.

SARA: What are your plans for developing the play for touring?

PHIL: The idea that's been handed to us from the B.C. Federation of Labour is that the money could be gotten from the Unemployment Action Centres and labour councils to pay for our wages if

we could get money elsewhere for travel. The Unemployment Action Centres got a lot of flack during the B.C. Fed convention for not doing anything. Chryse thinks that the play would be a feather in their cap if they could do it without having to put out very much money. It's not going out and organizing, but for them to recognize the play would still be a victory.

To get the money that we've gotten for this (which is \$3,000 for four per-

formances) is a major victory. Even though it is by theatre standards really cheap, we're not doing it for free, and we're not doing it for next to nothing, which is what the tradition would be. That's a step in the right direction.

The mix of performers is interesting. We've got people from ACTRA, basically theatre community people, legit. We've had people who are wanting to be in ACTRA or Equity. We also have two actors from the post office. They're members of a union. I'm a

member of the Carpenters' Union but I'm not in the Musicians' Union and I'm playing the music. It raises certain questions about the rigidity around things being union, because there were people performing who were in other unions, but they're not the relevant unions. From the other side of it, there are people in the theatre community who are getting a much deeper understanding of unions. There is education going on both ways within the production, quite apart from the audience.

MURDER

Thirty-six floors is one hell of a way
Looking down that winter's day
Cars like toys on the street below
When I felt that fly-form start to go.

That morning not too much was said
Except the voice inside my head:
A glimpse... a shadow, that was all
To let me know that we might fall

Still you know it's hard to say
You can get those feelings just about every day
If you let it, it can make you quit
So you might as well get used to it

When you're working on the edge
You set a column, drive a wedge
You walk the line between your own safety
And the push for productivity

Then suddenly, you lose your breath
You're staring at the face of Death
You see above his hollow eyes
His hardhat bears the dollar sign

Now it's time to call a spade a spade
Cuz when we work there's fortunes made
Lives are lost, and money gained
And money killed us just the same
It was murder

A man's a heart, a man's a mind
A body and spirit all entwined
Goddamn the thing that takes this man
And treats him like a pair of hands

These hands could reach to hold a child
This face could soften in a smile
This heart could let its feelings show
This mind could tell you what it knows:
It was murder
Murder

Phil Vernon
1983

dedicated to Donald Davis, Brian Stevenson, Yrjo Mitrunen,
and Gunther Cuvieux, who fell to their deaths January 7,
1981.

S U M M E R 1 9 8 5

WHAT DOES IT TAKE

Sitting in this empty room just trying to understand
Waiting for another chance to be working with my hands
What would I do to work again
To know I'm a link in the human chain
To feel the world through my hands
And find a place where I can stand?
What does it take to make a man?
What does it take to make a man?
What does it take to understand?

Every morning when I wake
I feel the twisted knot of hate
Telling me I just don't make the grade.
What good are skills when they aren't used?
What good is trying when you're gonna lose?
Every day it's just the same.
And it keeps on getting harder
Being a husband and a father
While my body and my hands are going soft
And this empty feeling in my gut
Tells me that I'm in a rut
But it's goddamned hard to shake it off.

When I look around me, there's people taking sides,
Some are looking for a fight, some are just trying to hide.
Nobody's got the answers, just pieces that are true.
Now I can't stay here by myself: there's things that I can do.
And I'm looking for a place that's mine
And I could use a helping hand.
But I ain't gonna toe any line
Cuz the way I've been used
Just can't be excused
And now I'm gonna choose my way.

Phil Vernon
1985

F U S E

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