A Midsummer Night’s Mash-up
Adapting Shakespeare as a Canada Day Dance Party
by MARK MCCUTCHEON

On 1 July 2000, Toronto’s Opera House became the unlikely set for a passing strange adaptation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Serenity Industries, a Toronto dance party promotion company, hired the Queen Street East Theatre turned concert hall to host *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—a Canada Day rave.

Theorizing the Theatricality of the Dance Party
Clearly, some preliminary explanations are required to discuss a rave as a theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare. It is worth noting at the outset that this party belongs to an identifiable genre of rave adaptations of Shakespeare. On 24 June 1989, the seminal London acid house party company Sunrise hosted *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (see Fig. 1). More recently, film has become a genre in which rave aesthetics join Shakespearean scripts: Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* suggested that Romeo’s star-crossed love was catalyzed when he ate a pill at a party, while a fully throttle feature called *Rave Macbeth* hit German cinemas in November 2001.

In the summer 2000 issue of CTR, Beverly May argued that house and techno dance events are a form of participatory theatre” (8) wherein the dance floor “serves as the stage for ... transformative experiences” (9). By transformative experiences, May means a process whereby successful dance parties join the individual dancers and DJs in a collectivity whose transcendent vibe can be palpable, despite—or even because of—the event’s ephemeral transience: “The evening’s direction remains unknown until the participants engage with it” (10). However, “transforming” is also a specific DJ technique for mixing the beats of two records. The resulting double entendre suggests the myriad ways in which performance is at the heart of the rave experience: a cultural continuum (a discontinuum, if you will) collaboratively produced by the explicitly theatrical performances of the DJs and MCs, as well as the carnival of performances taking place among partygoers, promoters and everyone else in attendance.

DJ performances at Toronto parties tend, more often than not, to be emphatically staged so that the dancers can watch the DJs work (if they want to) more easily than they can at venues where the DJ occupies a booth removed from, or invisible to, the dance floor. Some parties—such as the Serenity party in question—organize the DJs’ performances as “battles” that Rebecca Brown notes are “fundamentally theatrical in nature” (5). The DJ battle, one of rave culture’s many appropriations of hip hop, brings two (or more) DJs together on stage to jam—and sometimes even compete with each other—by mixing and cutting between their respective records through the use of four turntables and two mixers.

Meanwhile, the performances on the dance floor can often provide as much as or more “eye candy” than the spectacle on stage, with dancers contributing a spectrum of styles, costumes, positions, poses, gestures and motions to the scene. There are “light shows,” in which partygoers manipulate glow sticks (whether adeptly or clumsily) for visual effects, as well as a variety of self-consciously performative dance styles, ranging from the hip hop styles of breakdancing to the fluid moves of white-gloved “liquid dancers.” It is possible to see everything from tai chi to *capoeira* being performed on the dance floor at raves.
In this context, we find a parallel between the post-modern rave and the early modern theatre in its formative stages. Of the commercial theatre's origins in "traditional community-based pageantry," Michael Bristol writes that "playing in this context is a particularly vivid and engaging form of social participation, a 'pastime' used for purposes of conviviality and the expression of shared social meaning" (34). Here, dancing constitutes a kind of play, and DJing a kind of playing. Still, a crowd of partygoers at first might seem more like the "shifting and anonymous public rather than a community" identified by Bristol as a typical audience for theatre productions in early modern London (50). But despite the technically public accessibility of this and most parties to anyone who buys a ticket, raves like Serenity's, which cater to hardcore musical tastes (as we will see), can filter out more passive followings and become virtually exclusive events attended by a clientele that is there first and foremost to engage with the challenging musical context set by the DJs (Gaillot 100) - a clientele there to dance. Serenity's rave adapted Shakespeare's rēte chiefly for its atmospheric pastoral effects (as detailed below) and for its seasonal timeliness, but it also unwittingly staged this adaptation in a participatory context not unlike the early modern mise en scène described by Bristol.

The term "rave" has actually fallen out of favour with Toronto ravers, in direct proportion to its leverage by the mass media as a useful word with which to sensationalize the youth-driven industry of electronic music and the all-night dance parties that remain vital forums not only for its popular appreciation but also for its myriad aesthetic developments. With reference to the British advent of "raving" as we know it, Simon Reynolds writes:

In 1988 the word "rave" was in common parlance, but mostly only as a verb, e.g., "I'm going out raving tonight." By 1989 "rave" was a fully fledged noun and "raver" was, for many, a derogatory stereotype, an insult. While "raving" came from black British dance culture, and originally from Jamaica, "raver" plugged into a different etymology. The Daily Mail had used the word in 1961 to condemn the boorish antics of "trad jazz" fans at the Beaulieu Jazz Festival. A few years later a TV documentary employed "raver" to evoke the nymphomaniac hysteria of teen girl fans and groups. There had also been an "All Night Rave" at the Roundhouse in October 1966, a psychotropic spectacular featuring Pink Floyd and the Soft Machine. All these connotations—frenzied behaviour, extreme enthusiasm, psychedelic delirium, the black British idea of letting off steam on the weekend—made "raving" the perfect word to describe the acid house scene's out-of-control dancing. (77)

"Rave" harbours additional etymological resonances - with revelry and (as a word for delirious speech derived from Old Northern French) with Melbourne's A Midsummer Night's Dream. But in order to set the scene for this party, it is worth noting how "rave" has become headline-friendly shorthand whereby a broad spectrum of youth-related issues - from unsafe sex to organized crime - are sensationalized in order to sell papers, while the unfamiliar aesthetics and entrepreneurial economics of the dance events themselves go more or less unnoticed. In Canada, the media furore over raves peaked in the summer of 2000, following three pivotal events that continue to exert lasting impact on Toronto's rave culture.

The (new) Politics of (no) Dancing

First was Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino's infamous press conference, held on 14 March 2000, where the freshly-appointed chief posed behind a table of seized guns and other weapons to declare that Toronto would no longer tolerate the "dens of drugs and guns" represented by illegal after-hours clubs and raves ("FWD: The Fatal Blow in Toronto"). Conflating raves with after-hours boozecans, the Chief became an instant laughingsketch among Toronto ravers; during a subsequent discussion forum broadcast by MuchMusic, a police spokesperson was forced to admit that guns had never been seized at raves, while raver activists representing the Party People Project (PPP) waved placards outside the studio that read "The only guns you find at raves are squirt guns."

During this discussion, novelist and pundit Russell Smith observed how the mass media's coverage of raves was "cylical" and ignored the more interesting but "more difficult" story of techno as the aesthetic core of the dance events themselves. Typifying this kind of coverage was the Maclean's cover story "Rave Fever" (Oh), which raised the "moral panic" (Jenkins) over raves to a national level just one week before the second pivotal event: the Ontario Coroner's inquest into the 10 October 1999 death of Allan Ho, a Ryerson student who died after taking ecstasy at a rave that was held in "the basement of a former shoe factory" (Ellis). (The ironic fact that the venue was literally underground has not helped the general public to understand the term, or its relation to raves, in its sub-cultural sense.)

The third event was Toronto City Council's decision - at which it arrived between 9 and 11 May 2000, barely one week after the Ho inquest began - to immediately suspend the leasing of any City-owned facility for the purpose of holding Rave parties ("Minutes of the Council of the City of Toronto" III). Mayor Mel Lastman was anxious to keep the financially fraught city from facing liability in the event of anyone dying at a party held on city-owned venues such as the CNE's Better Living Centre. Ironically, the Ho inquest jury's second of nineteen concluding recommendations advised the city to lift this ban, arguing that the absence of safe and legal venues providing amenities like free running water would drive promoters to hold events at unsafe, underground venues and thus put party-goers at risk ("Rave Recommendations").

Although the city did finally lift the ban on 3 August 2000 (Rusk), raves have for the most part stayed away from city-owned venues on account of the steadily increasing number of paid-duty officers required (Abbate), under Fantino's leadership, to staff parties held on public property. For example, in 1998, the annual Halloween party Freakin' was held on CNE (i.e., city-owned) grounds; the Lifeforce consortium of promoters organizing the event was required to hire one sergeant and eight officers
to patrol a party that was attended by an estimated 10,000 people. An April 2000 event attended by an estimated 8,100 people, however, was required to hire two sergeants, two staff sergeants, and fifty officers. Freakin’ 2000, the first event held at the CNE after the city lifted its ban, included a conspicuous police operation that was led by one Sergeant Ewing, who informed me directly that he had “no idea” how many officers were on site that night (McCutcheon). Most tellingly, there was no Freakin’ held in 2001. Ignoring not only the inquest jury’s recommendations but also the extant guidelines of the Toronto Dance Safety Committee (a committee of party promoters, city councilors and police representatives originally organized by Kim Stanford to impose reasonable safety standards on electronic dance events), Fantino continues to direct the Toronto police force in targeting the Toronto rave scene with exorbitant and intimidating police operations (Stanford and McCutcheon 10).

Albeit a very rough sketch of some very complicated politics, the above remarks should show that tensions among Toronto’s promoters, police, policy-makers and partygoers were at an all-time high in the summer of 2000, when Serenity Industries, a relative newcomer to the Toronto scene, was busy organizing its Midsummer Night’s Dream Canada Day celebration. Founded in early 2000, Serenity Industries is a dance party promotion business consisting of Brad Ferris, veteran Toronto DJ X (a.k.a. Willar Tang), décor specialist Michelle Harding, Chris O. and Neil Ng (Tang). Serenity had thrown its first party, Welcome to the Family, on 8 April 2000, following that up with a party called Payback, held on 15 April, the very next weekend; while Payback demonstrated Serenity’s organizational skills, it inadvertently emboiled the fledgling company in controversy. The internationally popular Hullabaloo promotion company, whose parties regularly sold out in advance, had been planning to host a massive event, Through the Looking Glass, that weekend, but last-minute negotiations with Toronto police fell through and Hullabaloo had to cancel its party. Serenity – alongside other lower-profile promoters like Small Society – moved quickly to capitalize on the sudden market opportunity; however, another company called Funhouse, operated by friends of Hullabaloo owner Chris “Anabolic Frolic” Samojlenko, was simultaneously scheduling the DJs that Hullabaloo had booked to play an alternate party, the proceeds from which went to pay the DJ fees originally promised by Hullabaloo (Michelle). Thus, the smaller promoters drew some community criticism for acting opportunistically; according to Peter “Subsonic Chronic” Elkerbout, the Funhouse Hullabaloo fundraiser was not as well attended as it might have been in the absence of other competition (Elkerbout).

Hard Bargains, Hardcore, Hard House

This commentary provides some political and economic background for a more detailed discussion of Serenity Industry’s third party, A Midsummer Night’s Dream; it also reveals another unexpected parallel between Toronto’s dance party industry and the nascent “underground economy” of early modern London theatre, as historicized by Bristol. Tracing the early modern commodification of performance and print products that would eventually turn Shakespeare into a cultural institution, Bristol notes that

in the formation of this early modern entertainment industry ... the first stage corresponds to the emergence of a number of more or less permanent repertory companies that provided a decent livelihood for their members by performing in rented spaces. (31)

Although Toronto’s biggest and best-known party promotion companies (e.g. Hullabaloo, Destiny, Liquid Adrenaline) can claim, at best, a dubious permanence in the current political climate, there is a striking similarity between their operations and those of the early modern repertory companies in renting spaces for performance. Moreover, the second and third stages Bristol describes, in which “capital investment in permanent infrastructure” yields first the construction of “purpose-built playhouses” and then “vertical integration as the members of the repertory companies themselves invest in theater buildings” (31) arguably correspond to the strategic deals that some promoters and DJs have made with nightclubs (e.g., Lifeforce’s relationship with Turbo or Industry founder Matt C’s ownership of the Queen street “dance pub” NASA).

A major difference between dance culture in Toronto today and the early modern entertainment industry described by Bristol is that the three stages he describes as a sequence in the latter context are, in the former, concurrent and often overlapping. As the police paid-duty officer protocol has effectively kept city-owned venues well out of promoters’ price ranges, more promoters have turned to the clubs to sustain their business. In addition, Elkerbout asserts that owners of private, non-club venues recognized, in the media furore over dance parties, an opportunity for increased profit:

As soon as all this attention got brought to the rave scene ... the venue owners were all of a sudden like “Oh, we can make so much money off this,” because they just kept testing the waters, and the promoters were still willing to pay more and more for the venues to the point where now almost every venue is overpriced... Lighting and sound as far as I know have gone up, DJs aren’t really charging that much more... For instance, the Opera House: we had thrown a party, the DIY party ... a few years ago [on New Year’s Eve 1998] and it cost us something like $1,500 to rent out the Opera House and now it’s closer to something like $7,000 or $8,000 ... the venue owners have just been hiking up the prices. (Elkerbout)

Serenity member Tang agrees that “the quest for new venues is endless right now” – not only for Serenity but for most other Toronto promoters – adding that “authorities aren’t making things any easier for us” (Tang). What has enabled non-club venue owners to inflate their rental prices is the fact that while more reasonable deals could be made with nightclubs for promoters of house, techno, garage and other “progressive” or cross-over genres, clubs are simply not an option for promoters who specialize in
those music genres whose "subcultural intransigence" keeps them firmly in the "rave" camp delineated by Reynolds as "hardcore":

Whenever I hear the word "hardcore" (or synonyms like "dark," "cheesy") used to malign a scene or sound, my ears prick up. Conversely, terms like "progressive" or "intelligent" trigger alarm bells; when an underground scene starts talking this talk, it's usually a sign that it's gearing up to play the media game as a prequel to buying into the traditional music industry structure of auteur-stars, concept albums, and long-term careers... Hardcore scenes are strongest when they remain remote from all of that and thrive instead as anonymous collectives, subcultural machines. (6-7)

Hullabaloo is Toronto's best-known hardcore bastion. Since its first event on 21 June 1997, Hullabaloo has made happy hardcore (180 beats per minute (BPM), adult-contemporary remixes, no apologies) the main musical event at all its parties, and it has deservedly won a fiercely devoted core of followers for this reason. There is no sitting on the fence with happy hardcore - with its frenetic tempo and campy diva vocals, you have to love it or hate it. Since its inception, Serenity has attempted to stake a similarly specialized claim in the relatively novel genre of UK hard house. UK hard house DJ Madame Zu headlined Serenity's first event and co-headlined a more recent event on 4 August 2001 alongside Mohawk label owner Chris C. - who also headlined A Midsummer Night's Dream. Elkerbout, who has played four of the seven parties Serenity has hosted to date, is one of a handful of Toronto DJs who specialize in this genre.

UK hard house is a genre afflicted by a localized identity crisis. First, there is the need in Toronto for a national prefix to distinguish the UK sound from the Chicago hard house of labels like Underground Construction, MR and Abstract, played by Toronto DJs like Kamikaze and Deception. Chicago hard house re-activates the alien abrasiveness with which the original Chicago house tracks first greeted listeners. Chicago hard house clips along at roughly the same 140-150 BPM tempo of UK hard house, but whereas the American sound is raw and sparse, stressing distorted kick drums, squeaking riffs, pealing sirens and stomping arpeggios of snares and claps, UK hard house is a rich swirl of bouncy basslines, Roland 303 "acid" loops and - as its signature sound - endless modulations of the baleful synth sample introduced by Joey Beltram's 1991 track "Mentasm," and subsequently popularized by countless hardcore tracks as the "hoover" sound. Reynolds describes the "hoover" as follows:

The monstrous "mentasm" sound—a killer-bee drone derived from the Roland Juno Alpha synthesizer, a seething cyclone hiss that sends ripples of shuddery rapture over your entire body surface—spread through rave culture like a virus... The "mentasm stab"—which took the sound and gave it a convulsive riff pattern—was hardcore's great unifier, guaranteed to activate the E-rush. The "Mentasm" noise has a manic yet dirgelike quality similar to the down-tuned guitar sound used by Black Sabbath and their doom-metal ilk. It's no coincidence: Beltram was consciously aiming to re-create the vibe of Sabbath and Led Zeppelin, his teenage faves. (123)

For Elkerbout, the tempo, basslines and staccato "hoover" sequences of UK hard house clearly distinguish it from a genre alongside which it is frequently found in the repertoires of local DJs like AT-AT or the Therapist: trance. Trance tends to be slower (e.g., 130 BPM), more melodic and often punctuated by beatless breakdowns in which dance floor momentum gives way to vistas of ambient, "cinematic" sound (Reynolds 202). By contrast, breakdowns in UK hard house tracks more often include breakbeats, usually of the bass-heavy variety, that lend the sound a junglistic flavour. With its trenchant reliance on the "hoover," its propulsive tempo, and a myriad other musical references to capital-R rave anthems from the early 1990s, UK hard house adapts and redeploy the "oldschool" or "ardcore" techno of Beltram and other seminal producers like Timebase and Slipmatt (DiPietro).

Like most other promoters - including Hullabaloo - Serenity's party line-ups include representatives from a variety of popular electronic genres. While their headline acts have been UK hard house acts, their inclusion of local DJs playing house, trance, jungle and breaks (Tang's own specialty, an up-tempo grab-bag of hip hop samples, syncopated drums and basslines that also engages the legacy of early 1990s "oldschool") demonstrates a market-savvy recognition that more variety means potentially more business.

Ambivalently Adapting Shakespeare

Having sketched some of the theoretical, political, economic and aesthetic contexts in which Serenity's A Midsummer Night's Dream took place, we can turn our attention to the specific ways in which the party adapted its nominal Shakespearean source.

Describing the theatrical dimension of raves, May writes that "a unified, cohesive sense of artistic planning should be effected" in order to "craft a successful event" (9). Tang tells me that "the idea behind Serenity was to throw quality events with a focus on ... detail in visuals and of course quality music" (Interview). Elkerbout concurs, noting that the Serenity crew "take[s] that extra step with decorations" (Interview). Because the visual apparatus of A Midsummer Night's Dream provides some intriguing evidence for the party's Shakespearean adaptations, we might as well begin where most ravers would - with a look at the flyer (Figs. 2 and 3).

"Saturday July 1st the Serenity crew returns," the flyer states, "bringing with them a night destined to enchant... Prepare to dream...." Keenly aware of heightened public scrutiny, and in keeping with ravers' own constant tendency towards "collective disappearance" (Reynolds 239), the Serenity crew used Shakespeare's play to advertise its event by displacing typical raverspeak (which is already a displaced "street" discourse that seeks
to resist public understanding through the use of defamil-
iliarizing language) onto a high-cultural milieu. “To
dream,” perchance, “to go mental” or “to dance your ass
off” is what partygoers are actually being encouraged to
do. In this flyer, “to dream” is “to rave”—without actually
having to say so. If the Serenity crew had dropped their
Shakespeare citation after this point, we might well ask,
“What’s in a name?” But both the flyer and, more impor-
tantly, the party play further with the source text’s plot,
characters and setting.

As if his bride DJ X weren’t skittish enough at the
approach of their party, Serenity is obliged to listen
to the complaints of opposing sides in a dispute
over arranged DJ battles: Big League Chu vs. Marty
McFly, as well as Subsonic Chronic vs. Satori &
Popsicle Pete vs. Entity.

Ordered by Sean Miller to obey, all the DJ[sic]
agree, using a new fangled invention... 4-decks
[four turntables]!! But D-Minus’ best friend
Popsicle Pete who is playing at the party as well,
warns him of their plot to administer some kick ass
sets. That night, when the DJ’s[sic] flee into the for-
est to join the festival, Chris C. takes after them on
his own bike, with a determined DJ X pedalling in
hot pursuit, never knowing that Jason Marshall was
watching for them when they arrived.

When they do arrive, DJ X turns to D-Minus and
says, “Tonight will be like a dream D-Minus.”

“Not just a dream DJ X, but a midsummer night’s
dream ... ” (Serenity Industries)

What first marks this text as unusual is its very ver-
bosey: most flyers do not waste half as many words to
hype their parties. And hyping the anticipated party is
arguably the function of this text, which is hardly poetic
and which unfolds according to a nonsensical but logical-
sounding rhetoric not unlike that found in television com-
mercials (e.g. Popsicle Pete’s “warning” rhetorically
opposes but conceptually supports the DJs’ agreement
reached in the prior sentence). This flyer is to its genre
what Polonius is to Hamlet, or what Shakespeare too
often is to a high school classroom—so much sound and
fury, signifying nothing.

But if this text works merely as advertising, why
bother repeating information—concerning the line-up of
DJs and how they are paired for battle—on the facing
page, in the quick-reading list format that ravers read first
when browsing for parties? Whereas other promoters
might fill extra flyer space with psychedelic graphics, the
Serenity crew opted here to reiterate the party’s planned
entertainment in a brief Shakespearean parody, one
fraught with multiple ironies. For one, the story signals—
but only to others who have read Shakespeare’s play—
that the Serenity crew knows its Shakespeare (or knows it
well enough, at any rate, to have read more than
the play’s title). The spare, elliptical references (e.g. the com-
plaints, the forest) thus enable the Serenity crew to cann-
ily navigate the minefield of “cool” (mapped by Burt[11])
that must be traversed when a sub-cultural player wants
to cite Shakespeare in its production (even just as market-
 ing leverage) without compromising its underground cachet.
Another irony lies in how the story queers its
source by casting Tang (DJ X) as Serenity’s “bride.” On
one level, this casting can be read as a humorous reference
to Serenity’s business organization; on another level, it
conjures the male transvestite casting practices ac-
conforming to which the play would have been originally staged.
(Further queering of this sort may be inferred from the
flyer’s—and, as we will see, the venue decorators’—use of
“fairy” images.) Further irony may be read in the threat to “administer some kick ass sets.” Administration is an oddly clinical-sounding departure from more conventional synonyms for DJing (“throwing down,” “rinsing out” or “pimping”). But in light of the fact that raverspeak frequently re(e)fers to virtuoso DJ practice as the best narcotic (e.g., Pete Elkerbout’s handle as “Subsonic Chronic” plays with this convention in its roundabout hip hop reference to cannabis), the word “administer” assumes a pharmaceutical resonance that also suggests, almost as the text’s unconscious, the alternative economy of dangerous supplements organized around and within the scene of the dance party. A further subtextual suggestion of “administration” reveals how this Shakespearean adaptation takes place not only between bodies but also within them: the “love juice” (Shakespeare 3.2.37) Puck administers to Lysander and Demetrius finds a non-fictional, modern analogue in ecstasy as a chemical catalyst for love—albeit of a more empathic than amorous kind (Reynolds 83).

While Tang says the flyer story was directly based on the play (“we just replaced the names and some of the text to keep it in theme with our party”) he denies any more significant connection between the play and the party. “We wanted a name that would best fit the season we were in —summer—and we wanted to give the party a warm and welcoming feel” (Interview). Tang’s comment reveals one of the most striking features of Serenity’s party in the context of adaptation: here is a scene of cultural production that leverages Shakespearean references not as markers of high cultural excellence but instead as signifiers (mostly empty ones at that) of sub-cultural expenditure. In the promoters’ explicit ambivalence toward the source text, we find a validation of Fischlin and Fortier’s claim that “Shakespeare is adapted in large part simply because he is a major author” (6).

Turning from the flyer to the scene of the party, the Serenity crew developed the Midsummer Night’s Dream theme in decorating the venue where it would be staged. The Opera House was festooned with fairies and flowers, while a sylvan fairy mural, painted especially for the occasion, was mounted behind the DJ stage (Fig. 5, below). Lit wooden torches (a dramatic, if arguably dangerous, decorative addition) were placed around the room. As well, Elkerbout recalls that vine-entwined arches had been placed over each of the two stairways leading down from the Opera House bar area to the dance floor. “It was one of the nicer looking parties of that year... it had a very natural, magical-forest feel to it” (Interview). This framing of the dance floor as the forest dramatizes May’s sense of the dance floor as a site of carnivalesque fantasy and transformation (8). The forest décor also adapts the specifically pastoral aesthetic that has become one of rave culture’s many embedded discourses (Gilbert and Pearson 30). Like pastoral writing, a rave is an “urban and sophisticated” (Alpers 35) production of an otiose Arcady away from the workaday, a potentially subversive site for “games and musical contests” (179). It is possible that Serenity (whose very name has a somewhat pastoral ring) was taking another cue from Hullabaloo, which on 17 April 1999 hosted Foreverland, a Peter Pan-themed party where the dance floor was decorated with several live potted trees (Samojlenko, “Foreverland”). In any case, Serenity’s decorators made the interesting choice to interpret the forest setting of A Midsummer Night’s Dream primarily as a pastoral effect; in so doing, they dramatized how every rave aspires to become an urban locus amoenus.

Figure 4: Fairy doll decorations. 
PHOTO COURTESY OF JOEL KRONENBERG/PURERAVE.COM

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to the UK for headliners), C. came to the party armed with promotional copies of new material, some of which he gave to Elkerbout, including the "Dreamer" track in question (Elkerbout, Interview).

Although this track's title suited Serenity's party theme perfectly, the vocal sample that gave the record its name has an entirely different source. "Behold, here cometh the dreamer," intones a sombre male voice (in the remix, the sample is time-stretched to give it a hallucinatory quality). This sample quotes the first few words of Genesis 37:19 (Metzger), in which Joseph's brothers, fed up with the dreamer's visions of grandeur, plot to kill him. (I do not know what sound or film recording the sample is taken from, but it was previously sampled a decade ago by Dave Angel's "Nightmare mix" of the Eurythmics' "Sweet dreams" [RCA 1989].) An isolated excerpt on the record, the phrase assumes a more general, annunciateatory sense, accompanying a drum roll that segues to an anthemic sequence of kinetic "hoover" stabs that echo "oldskool" hooks like those heard on Outlander's 1991 "Vamp" or Rufige Cru's 1993 "Terminator II."

**Patriotism and Parody**

Another notable distinction in that night's festivities was the opportunity taken by the promoters to stop the music, drop balloons on the Serenity massive, and lead everyone in a rendation of "O Canada." It was a Canada Day party, after all; even the police on duty seemed to be digging the vibe (Fig. 7). Sparklers were shared, flared and waved about as the crowd sang the national anthem. In doing so, the Serenity massive embodied a displaced, deconstructed and decentred performance of Shakespeare, the polyphonic unison of which, no less than the Dream in High Park or government-sponsored research, dramatized the continuing function of Shakespeare in the process of nation-building (Fischlin and Fortier 11). It is worth adding that Shakespearean adaptations of the kind undertaken by Serenity go forward without any official recognition that the activity is even cultural at all, let alone culture worth funding.

The dance crowd brought its own creative performances to the patriotic occasion; Elkerbout recollects that, although not many people were out in full-on "candy-raver" costume (e.g., fun fur, bright colours and toys as fashion accessories), he did see a few people accessorizing with Canadian flags (Fig. 8).
But if a raver is using the flag for a towel, is it patriotism or parody? Considering rave culture’s troubled relationship with the media, the same image could easily be used for either Olivia Chow’s youth advocacy or Police Chief Fantino’s crackdown. Immersed in and fuelled by the postmodern and post-punk aesthetics of pastiche, raver style (if there is such a thing, even provisionally) makes it possible to assimilate or represent national emblems as kitsch. I personally know a raver who has gained free entry to parties just by dressing in red and white, with a maple leaf on his hat and the flag as a cape on his back. As mentioned above, this kind of do-it-yourself costume play is a celebrated part of rave performativity. But it is also ironic and deeply ambivalent – just like Serenity’s use of the Shakespearean text. As an exaggerated dramatization of the way in which many (if not all) Canadians look forward to Canada Day mostly for the free time, the party in question starts to look increasingly carnivalesque: the symbols of official culture can be parodied – but only within the frame of officially sanctioned, and increasingly policed, “free” time (Stallybrass and White 13).

After the event, a raver identified only as “pb4ugo2bed,” posted an on-line review of the party that called it “certainly a dream come true” (9). His review was a literal rave, bigging up the selections and skills of DJs like Tang, Squirt and Satori in particular. This reviewer’s suggestion that Serenity’s party was “a dream come true” opens our understanding to another way the party as such adapted the very plot of the source play. Escaping the quotidian world’s regulations and threats to find refuge for a night in a “haunted grove” where normal identities are mistaken, new ones assumed, talking asses abound and a kind of dream logic pervades the whole scene, mediated through music and chemistry – according to this synopsis of the play, what rave is not an adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream?

Tang and Elkerbout both recall that the crowd attending A Midsummer Night’s Dream was diverse, perhaps relatively young, though many people were of legal drinking age. Interestingly, there were generally more women than men; Tang says this is typical for Serenity parties (Interview). What is not typical – for any Toronto party – is for women to perform as MCs: it is thus worth noting that a young MC calling herself Blade took the mic and spat some rhymes to accompany the jungle set that DJ Doublecross threw down (Fig. 9). It is an ironic bit of early modern history repeating itself that Blade’s performance was the one aspect of the party that “pb4ugo2bed” criticized – specifically because, the reviewer felt, female vocals were inappropriate for jungle music (9). Unwittingly echoing the sentiments of John Northbrooke (Cerasa and Wynne-Davies 161) or William Prynne (171), such comments are symptomatic of the objectionable – but not unchallenged (Pyle) – sexism with which late-modern DJ culture also unfortunately resembles the early modern theatre.

The fact that the party was held on Canada Day accounted, in Tang’s estimation, for a “relatively low turnout” (Interview). Serenity had to compete with other parties being held not only on that Saturday but also on the Sunday of the long weekend as well as with nightclubs like Industry and System Soundbar boasting local favourites and international headliners. Oddly enough, while Serenity’s operations are currently on hold (Tang, Interview), it appears as though clubs may take precedence over raves in Serenity’s future plans. Acknowledging Serenity’s founding stakes in UK hard house, trance and breaks, Tang suggests that the crew will in future turn its attention to a “more mature crowd... with the best there is to offer in house and breaks” (Interview). As the genre in which Tang (Fig. 10, p. 41) has long specialized, breaks will remain an obvious constant in Serenity’s business, and it is a genre that has made decisive inroads at Toronto clubs in the last two years.

Elkerbout echoes Tang’s anxiety about the altered state of Toronto’s electronic music industry. Although he states a definite preference for spinning at one-off parties, he is clearly frustrated that UK hard house has yet to cross over, like breaks, trance, drum ‘n’ bass or techno before it, into clubland popularity:

[Hard house] hasn’t really caught on in Canada and the US like it has in the UK, and in Australia, and pretty much everywhere else except here—it’s still definitely more of a party music than club music.... I definitely prefer spinning parties but as the parties are dwindling and as the clubs are getting bigger it’s
becoming a bit of a challenge. We’re trying really hard to promote the music and trying to get it into clubs … There’s really never any club that regularly features any out-of-town [hard house] talent. (Interview)

Both Elkerbout’s clubland aspirations and Serenity’s anticipated turn toward a “more mature” clientele — signalled by Tang’s reference to house as a “mature” genre (presumably excluding hard house) — are symptoms of the uncertain yet tenacious status of hardcore dance music in Toronto. As Reynolds argues, hardcore scenes may be those that work hardest to develop new sounds and styles, but they tend to be scenes characterized more by expenditure than profit. In a city where even big, hardcore-oriented companies like Hullabaloo often barely break even on the parties they throw (Samojlenko, “Discuss”), it is not uncommon for smaller companies to operate at a loss. In this economic context, it becomes important to reiterate that for Toronto rave promoters, Shakespeare cannot be leveraged as a marker of cultural excellence or exploited to turn a sure profit. Notwithstanding Serenity’s Dream — or more conventionally theatrical productions like Matthew MacFadzean’s acclaimed fringe play richardthesecond — it is unlikely that rave culture’s ambivalent adaptations of Shakespeare will foster either musical innovations or appreciative support from a public that tends more often to vilify this culture as a teen drug orgy, rather than recognize it as a complex — and recently endangered — nexus of diversified cultural production and performance. CTR

Note

1 See Samojlenko, “Anabolic Doesn’t Care.”

Works Cited

Elkerbout, Peter [Subsonic Chronic]. Personal interview. 8 Nov. 2001.
Samojenko, Chris [Anabolic Frolic]. “Anabolic Doesn’t Care.”


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