NB Power asked to put conditions on blood coal from Colombia

By TRACY GLYNN

Fredericton - A Colombian union leader, lawyer and survivor of eight assassination attempts told a crowd gathered on November 24 in the province’s capital that New Brunswickers have a responsibility to know about and act on the blood coal that is leaving his country and being sold to NB Power.

Francisco Ramirez Cuellar spoke of the murders, violence and poverty linked to multinational mining companies in his country and asked NB Power to put conditions on the coal on his leaving the country. He believes that if NB Power cannot guarantee the rights of labour and indigenous peoples from its current sources it should buy coal from co-operative mining operations in his country that respect the rights and lives of workers and people affected.

Ramirez also wants workers in Canada to get their pension funds to divest from mining companies implicated in egregious human rights violations. “We want workers in Canada to have good pensions. Workers everywhere deserve good pensions but pensions should not be invested in companies that are killing us in Colombia,” said Ramirez.

Ramirez is again the subject of an action alert demanding his safety. Now, a leader with the federation of energy sector unions, FUNTRAENERGETICA, Ramirez is under serious threat from paramilitary groups in the country because of his union activism that involves a number of lawsuits against Canadian and multinational mining companies for their involvement in assassinations and displacement of thousands of Colombians.

Ramirez’s union is moving forward with a lawsuit against Alabama-based Drummond Coal for war crimes. Ramirez says they plan to sue Cerrejón for similar crimes as the company is implicated in the murder of eight indigenous Wayuu women in 2004 in Puerto Bolivar, the port community where the coal leaves on boats owned by Canada Steamship Lines, once owned by former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin.

In his 2004 book, Profits of Extermination: Big Mining in Colombia, Ramirez explains that Canadian organizations like the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canadian Energy Resources Institute (CERI) were involved with rewriting Colombia’s mining code to make mining more favourable to foreign investors in the country. Ramirez argues that the new mining code is not providing the revenue it should from his country’s mines, revenue that is needed for essential public services like healthcare, education and drinking water.

Exxon-Mobil and the National Colombian Mining Company started the Cerrejón mine in 1982. The International Monetary Fund imposed free market reforms on Colombia in 2002 and the mine was sold to a consortium of multinationals. Tremendous profits and the mining code to make mining more attractive to foreign investors are the reason that many of these companies are implicated in human rights abuses and environmental degradation. 

Ramirez’s tour in Canada was organized and supported by the Atlantic Regional Solidarity Network and was supported locally by the Fredericton & District Labour Council, the Association of UNB Teachers, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and St. Thomas University’s History Department.

Francisco Ramirez Cuellar in Fredericton in November 2015. Photo by Brian Atkinson.

By MARGO SHEPPARD


Manuel’s show embodies public anger following provincial government announcements in 2014 that it had struck deals with forestry companies to hike harvest rates on Crown lands by twenty percent.

“Start you out on the bottom rung (of the worry ladder) and as you go up, you approach full-blown anxiety,” said Manuel in an exhibition walk-through at the University of New Brunswick’s Memorial Hall in October, “As everyone knows, worry is a management system.”

The name of the exhibition comes from a quotation in a book called The Known World by Edward P. Jones and depicts the artist’s perspective on political and economic forces affecting New Brunswick’s public forests.

Public forests on unceded Wolastoq, Mi’kmaq and Passaquammooq territory comprise half of this Maritime province, but few actually know the details of what goes on there. Industrial cutting licences issued by the Department of Natural Resources give ownership privileges to a handful of companies such as J.D. Irving.

Manuel’s show has five meticulously crafted ladders: composites of the trunks of native species (bird, poplar, spruce and alder), interwoven with aluminum ladder sections and ingeniously-placed cast-offs from old wood working equipment. A ceiling-mounted canopy of red oaks1 underscores the installation, their bright red bark.

Manuel says, “an alarm system” of sorts.

The ladder is a metaphor for the ladder of success, and its triumph over all that is less than, looked down-upon, disdained, dominated —in other words, nature, and non-human living things. In this language of exploitation, nature falls into two categories: merchantable and everything else. Alders, white birch and willows for example, are “weed” or “junk” species. Manuel says that how we refer to objects is a reflection of a culture; words shape opinion and strongly influence our perceptions of the world.

Even the word “harvest,” normally associated with the idea of goodness or bounty, takes on a more sinister connotation when used to describe tree cutting. Picture the less than comocpuia-like maw of a chipping truck, decked out in air filters, never satisfied. The picture efficiently sums up the state of industrial forestry in this province.

The loss of deer herds is the theme of another ladder called "Loss." In 2014 the NB Government, with the stroke of a pen, halved the number of deer yards and imperiled many bird and mammal species. Even white-tail deer, plentiful and numbering close to a quarter million when the Crown Lands and Forests Act came into effect in 1982, have dwindled and now number less than one-quarter of this. Biodiversity, misunderstood and having no perceptible market value, is a casualty of government indifference and industry greed. We are passing what Mauel calls a “tolerable equilibrium” as a result of our mistreatment of public forests.

A ladder called “Sustainability” features rungs made out of pieces of axes, hand saw and chainsaw blades, culminating with a part from a mechanical harvester. At the “low” end, the axe represents hundreds of men


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Fredericton - Theatre New Brunswick is showcasing Nova Scotia’s Mulgrave Road Theatre Production of “Watching Glory Die,” written by Judith Thompson, and inspired by the tragic story of NB teen Ashley Smith who died while in prison.

This one-woman show featured the talented Stephanie MacDonald, who carries the weight of the story by playing all three characters highlighted by the playwright, Glory, is the incarcerated teen girl, Gail is the guard who works at the prison and Roseler is Glory’s mother.

MacDonald skillfully passes from one character's monologue to the other in the blink of an eye. She was consecutively a creative and rebellious teen, a worried mother and a defiant guard and, showing her breadth as an actress, and was both distinct and believable as each protagonist.

Ashley Smith is a Moncton teen who committed suicide in the Grand Valley institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario, in 2007 while on suicide watch. As a young girl, Smith got in trouble for various minor offences and seemed to have a great interest in art and dance. Despite her talent and interest in art, she was transferred a total of 17 times from 8 institutions in her and 150 attempts at self-harm.

Playwright Judith Thompson’s interlaced monologues capture the essence of the tragedy that surrounds the teen’s death, even today. Central to the performance is the incredulosity from all the people involved, as to the reason why and how the system somehow failed Ashley Smith. Given this conundrum, Thompson’s only answer in the play is to accentuate the incomprehension of all involved: Glory and Roseler wonder why Glory is in prison while Gail, the guard, wonders why she has this role. The bewilderment extends to the public’s reaction to the piece, since it can’t help but feel for all of the actors involved.

Although the play claims to be loosely based on Ashley Smith’s story, those familiar with the details of her death (something hard to avoid since it was in the news so often and into 2013), will appreciate the precision in Thompson’s detailed monologues, especially in the characters of Glory and Roseler.

Sophie M. Lavoie covers arts and culture for the NB Media Co-op.

The timing of the Fredericton play coincided with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s November 13th announcement that the Canadian government will move towards implementing recommendations from the last Ashley Smith inquest, specifically the banning of long-term solitary confinement for federal inmates and not putting vulnerable prisoners in solitary confinement.

Modernization and technology have meant that fewer people can do an ever increasing amount of damage in the woods. A store关闭了。With little value added manufacturing in NB (most of the wood is exported as logs) and the government demonstrating no support for community-run forests and private woodlot owners, it is no wonder the jobs numbers just aren’t there.

As NB’s Auditor General has pointed out, the province has lost hundreds of millions of dollars in management fees and concessions to the forest industry in the past few years. Contrast this to the news that NB lumber exports have increased 40% over the past four years, to $397 million. Someone is getting rich from our Crown wood and it is not the NB Treasury.

MacDonald is philosophical about it all: “You can’t dive into this topic (forestry) and not get worried about things, the animals, the water, what we are losing and have lost is so bad. “I kind of think of the artist as a bit of a canary in the coalmine,” she says. MacDonald believes in the power of art not only for humane refugee and immigrant policies in Canada.

The artist hopes to take “The Worry Ladders” to other venues in Atlantic Canada. To contact the artist about bringing the exhibition to your community, email info@nbmediacoop.org.

Margo Sheppard is the former executive director of the Nature Trust of New Brunswick. She continues to work on forest conservation efforts in the province.

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Community Calendar

Cinema Politica believes in the power of art not only to entertain but to engage, inform, inspire, and provoke social change. Cinema Politica Fredericton screens films on Friday nights at Conserver House, 180 St. John St. at 7:00pm. Check out the films and venues at cinemapolitica.org.

Refugees Welcome Fredericton Rally. Sat., Dec. 12 at 1:00pm at Fredericton City Hall (Queen & York). The rally will extend a warm welcome to refugees and call for meaningful refugee and immigrant policies in Canada. Contact: refugeeswelcomefredericton@gmail.com.

For details and updated event listings, visit nbmediacoop.org.

Photo from refugeeswelcome.ca.