



**ENDRE FARKAS &
CAROLYN MARIE SOUAID**

Blood is Blood An Arab-Jew collaboration

Art is not McArt

In a world more and more driven by market philosophy, many perceive art as being useless unless it can be bought and sold at a profit. From this perspective, art isn't important to our ability to function as a society, or relevant to the political or social discourse. Art can't clothe or feed us, or provide us with shelter. For most, art is apart from, and not part of the world. Yes, lip service is paid and funding (many think too much) is allocated by governments, educational institutions, and some of the more "enlightened" corporations. But when hard times hit, the arts, along with social services, are first to get the axe.

There are other reasons why the arts are relegated to the back burner of our consciousness. One is because art is not McArt. It is not a mass produced commodity. It is not utilitarian. It is not easily and quickly consumed. Because art raises more questions than it offers solutions, it requires thoughtful deliberation on the part of the reader, viewer or listener. This means, on the most basic level, slowing down and engaging with it for a period longer than most people are accustomed to. This goes against the grain of our high speed, high-tech, contemporary world.

Another reason is that art is not created by committee nor is it market tested and then tweaked and made palatable for the lowest common

denominator. Art is the physical “creation” of an individual. It embodies the vision, quirks and ego of the maker. The process is not necessarily logical, nor is it reproducible. In fact, it is this individualism that we value in art. But it is also what power structures consider dangerous.

Systems, organizations, and rulers are suspicious of individuality. They fear it. By the very nature of the way they work and think, artists are anarchists — or they should be. By anarchists, we do not mean people who destroy wantonly and without cause or purpose. They are anarchists because they often live or have chosen to live and think outside the box. Their contemplative and questioning nature inevitably leads them to step outside of their own (and society’s) comfort zone. This doesn’t mean that they live on another planet, although many from the “real” world might consider them aliens. Artists are workers whose work — and, by the way, “making art” is work — reflects their engagement in and with this world. Therefore they do not live only in their imagination. What makes them different from everyone else is the way they look at things, the way they react to the world. William Blake, the Romantic poet, described this state best when he wrote:

*To see the world in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour.*

Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence” goes on to convey a litany of evocative insights about social, political, and religious wrongs in the so-called “real” world.

What goes on in the real world affects artists. Sometimes, they try to ignore it and get on with their lives. But when an issue or event impacts them personally, many feel compelled to speak out. Silence is not an option. So it was with what eventually became *Blood is Blood*, our own long poem some four years in the making. The catalyst was something that affected us on a personal — and very visceral — level, events that were unfolding halfway around the world in the Middle East.

This is the point: Much of art is triggered by a passionate reaction to something in the world. The artist then does what the artist does best: expresses this human impulse through a particular medium. If the work is successful, it strikes an emotional chord in those who

experience it. Understanding this basic process is essential. It is what educators must explain to students before tendering a work of art for study, whether a painting, a musical composition, or a literary text. Knowledge of what provoked it is the “way in.” Once they are in, students can then engage with it on other levels, thereby deepening their experience.

The back story: *Blood is Blood*



***Blood is Blood*. Endre Farkas & Carolyn Marie Souaid. Signature Editions, 2010. 48 pages (includes DVD insert). www.bloodisblood.com. Winner of the 2012 ZEBRA International Poetry Film Festival, Berlin. “Best Film for Tolerance”.**

The 2006 July War between Israel and Lebanon lasted over a month and killed some 1,500 people — mainly Lebanese civilians. It devastated the country’s social, cultural and physical infrastructure. The Middle East was again in turmoil. And what had up until then been a non-issue for us suddenly became “the elephant in the room”: The two of us were from diametrically opposed backgrounds. One was a Hungarian Jew and the son of Holocaust survivors; the other, a Lebanese Christian with an adopted son from the land under attack. We were friends residing in “enemy houses.”

The heated correspondence between us began. “There go your people again,” began the first email. And then: “I think Israel is overreacting but it’s a survivalist’s instinct and there is the rub... It is hard to live in a neighbourhood where everyone wants you not only gone but extinct.” Emails shot back and forth between us, the shaky beginnings of a dialogue. As friends who had collaborated on multiple literary projects over the years, we needed to find a way to make sense of the conflict that had reignited. Were we to read ourselves into the entrails of the mess? Not surprisingly, we decided to rely on our skills and art to give voice, shape and meaning to the chaos. The emails began morphing into poetry.

When the issue is one of social justice, as ours was, it is easy for emotions to become inflamed. The difference between an artist’s response and that of someone without a creative outlet is that it rarely gets violent. The focus becomes activism: how to get the message across to the greatest number of people. In our case, we had to agree that both viewpoints had merit. This made it possible to be empathetic. From there, we could proceed as artists to demonstrate that war is not a way to get what one wants or needs. Nor is it an avenue to peace.

The creative process is seldom logical or linear. Most art is inspirational, which is to say it comes out of Eureka moments — some quiet, some loud, some slow, some quick. The way it manifests itself is a mystery. This is the pain and pleasure for the artist. For the audience, the creative process may not be readily apparent or relevant but this is something that students need to get their head around: Art is the result of a creative process. And this process requires dedication, perseverance and sweat.

As our emails grew into poetry and then into an early incarnation of our two-voiced piece, we began to consciously look for a literary motif to illustrate the conflict. One of our Eureka moments was when we came up with the “Romeo and Juliet” motif because it gave our theme a human dimension. It reduced the conflict from a concept to a concrete, palpable, manageable, relatable human size. We understood that for our piece to be successful and effective both as art and as a vehicle for social justice, it would have to touch the heart as well as the mind.

In the early drafts, we wrote back and forth as though we were lovers caught in the middle of the enemy’s house. Across the chasm, we wrote/spoke about what was going on and how we really felt —

sad, angry, bitter, loving, supportive, antagonistic, and more. Here, in the poetry, we could reveal some of our dark prejudices and deal with them rather than sweep them under the carpet. As the piece evolved, so did the text and the narrative. With time, inevitably, the personal became universal. The relationship became a symbol. The Romeo and Juliet theme broadened into a more universal one, one whose narrative could be applied to tribal wars that have wreaked havoc in other hotspots around the globe. Fundamentally, the piece became an inquiry into the very nature of conflict itself. Here is an example of the nonlinearity of the creative process: We first had to reduce the “global” to the “local” before we went “global” again.

An early audio version of *Blood is Blood* was recorded and aired on CBC Radio in December, 2006. Three years later, we hired videographer Martin Reisch and soundscape artist Mark Goldman to help us turn the poem on the page into a videopoem — *a poetic blending of text with images and sound* — that would convey the emotional landscape of conflict. What we did not want were visuals that would literally mimic what we had written for the page.

Collaboration and dialogue

A poem is usually the product of an individual’s imagination and efforts, one person’s words and decisions about word choice, syntax, line breaks, and so on. But *Blood is Blood* is unique in that it is the collaborative result of two people’s efforts. As collaborators, we were required to engage in a dialogue. It required that the dialogue be frank and true. It required that the integrity of the piece be paramount. This didn’t mean compromise but rather consensus. It required that ego (without losing its positive side) be parked.

What makes *Blood is Blood* even more interesting is that it was the collaboration of two individuals — with opposing views. This required that our differences be turned into strengths. An analogy might be useful here: If I have a dollar and you have a dollar, and I give you my dollar and you give me your dollar, then we still each have a dollar. However, if I give you an idea and you give me an idea, then we both have two ideas, and maybe those two give birth to a third, and so on.

As a poem, *Blood is Blood* required a fresh approach to writing. What began as a simple back and forth of poems turned into a layering of

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text that became a dialogue in the theatrical sense. It became dramatic verse. Individual poems were deconstructed and reconstructed into a new combined form. This meant “borrowing” lines from each other’s individual pieces, or using each other’s poems or lines as inspiration for the other’s. This creative process is best illustrated in the following excerpt from the poem:

*Entwined
It was impossible to know
Who was in whom
Who was breathing
Whose scent
In and out and of
What cosmos they were
The sun and moon*

The text here is not only sensual and erotic, but spiritual and creative. In the videopoem, both voices speak these lines simultaneously, though one starts at the beginning and the other at the end, with the two meeting on the same word mid-way through —“breathing” — and then continuing on, suggesting a coming together even in their apartness. This is the creative expression of the analogy mentioned earlier.

What began as a private conversation and evolved into poetry, and then into a single poem for two-voices, eventually made its way off the page. We first recited it publicly at regular reading venues: coffee houses, libraries and art galleries. We read to the converted, though the unusual nature of the poem did not always strike a sympathetic chord with conservative poetry audiences. Some felt it was too abrasive, too candid. Others, however, saw the value in our alternating harmony and cacophony, understood how it mirrored the heated conflict.

Soon came the desire to expand beyond traditional artistic venues. Other invitations began to come our way: from churches, from a synagogue, from a military college, from groups like “The Montreal Dialogue Group” and “Rabbis for Human Rights.” Occasionally we were asked to “tone down sensitive content” and even censor ourselves so as not to offend audience members who were sympathetic in principle, but who could easily turn on a dime. These requests became an interesting exercise in questioning the validity of our work and sticking to principles. What would be the price of sticking to our

principles? Losing a reading, an honorarium, or perhaps an audience? Very little when you consider what it might cost writers living under less democratic conditions. In some places, refusal to comply could mean life or death.

Wherever we have presented and performed *Blood is Blood* — at peace concerts, interfaith gatherings, poetry readings and literary salons — it has always provoked reaction. It has been walked out on. It has been accused of being pro-Arab and pro-Israeli by audience members *attending the same event*. It has stirred up audiences on both sides of the “wall.” This, we have taken, as a good sign because it is generating real dialogue. Such dialogue is not always pretty or polite, but it is certainly preferable to political rhetoric or to “discussions” through cross hairs. The experience has also given us a clear insight into how people listen. They listen with their baggage:

- An Iraqi-Moslem woman in Washington D.C. accused us of being naïve because we presented a balanced picture. She said we put the blame equally on both sides while she felt that it should have been weighted against Israel because it is a super power in the region.
- At a literary salon in Montreal, a woman who had spent much of her life in Israel felt that we didn’t know what we were talking about because we were from Canada and didn’t know what it was like to run with children to bomb shelters when rockets were flying overhead. She informed us “all Arab mothers raise their children to be terrorists.”
- In the middle of a cabaret performance, a woman in the audience stormed out of the theatre, slamming the door behind her.
- At several universities in Hungary, students wanted to know how we could be Canadians if we were of immigrant backgrounds. They were curious about multiculturalism.

The more we took it on the road, the better we got at “building a show” around the piece. The show usually began with our own poems of a more personal nature, but which already had the seeds of

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our social and cultural concerns. Endre shared poems from *Surviving Words* which deals with his parents' Holocaust experience as well as his own "immigrant" experiences. Carolyn read poems about traveling to Lebanon after the 15-year civil war and adopting her son. She also read from a collection called *Snow Formations*, focusing on the intersecting worlds of the Native and non-Native — based on her experience living among the Inuit of Northern Quebec. From there we went on to present some shorter two-voice pieces to introduce the idea of collaboration. We closed with *Blood is Blood* — sometimes a screening of the videopoem, sometimes a live performance. The show was intended to introduce students to different kinds of poetry, and, of course, to poetry with a global view.

In the classroom

Although we enjoyed and still enjoy these encounters because it takes us out of our comfort zone and makes us question and defend the whys and wherefores of our piece, cost and schedules make it impossible to travel everywhere we would like. This prompted us to look for an alternative means of taking our message out to the world. The internet seemed an obvious choice.

Being educators, we felt it was important that a multimedia website provide additional background material on the evolution of the project, the history of the conflict, and thoughts we had as we engaged in the writing process, as well as free downloadable curriculum guides for high school teachers wishing to work with our poem. What prompted us to write it? What trajectory did our creative process take? What were the social and political implications of dealing with controversial subject matter? We spent the better part of a summer creating different guides for different disciplines — one for English Language Arts, one for Ethics and Religious Culture and one for History. Using *Blood is Blood* as a starting point, each takes students through a series of activities that allows them to explore the themes of conflict, tolerance, intolerance, love and hate articulated by the poem through the specific lens of that discipline. We felt it was important for these materials to be accessible and free of charge for any school or teacher owning a copy of the book who wanted to engage their students in a meaningful learning experience.

Here is an excerpt, posted on our website, from an online magazine interview that provides a glimpse into our artistic process:

CMS: At times, the potato gets very hot! There is a section called “Your People” which weaves in and out of the piece. In it, each of us engages in some pretty inflammatory name-calling. For me, it was a difficult piece to write because it required that I commit to paper all the derogatory stereotypes of the Jew I had ever heard. I wrote it in one sitting but it took everything out of me. Here is just the tip of the iceberg:

Your earmarked, persecuted people.
Whose ovens smell and will always smell of revenge,
Inferiority, revenge, revenge.
Whose black, barbed-wire past excuses them
for making an industry of Hate,
excuses them for every slaughterhouse
that ever moved lock, stock, and barrel into their hearts...

Endre wrote a similar piece about the Arab, and then we began weaving them into the dialogue/argument. Working on the various segments, changing them, challenging their “truths” and editing, the process became truly collaborative. What is also interesting about this process is that since we both had a hand in editing and revising each other’s writing, neither of us can claim any one part of the text as our own.

EF: Something like this is a collaborative effort. It involved not only working with Carolyn but with a videographer and a composer; it required sound studio work, post production, and more. It is very difficult to get the stars and the finances required to align. But I think that we have opened up another avenue for poetry.

Getting students to tackle conflict

Teachers can use *Blood is Blood* in any number of ways with their students, either at the high school or collegial level. Here are two activities that have been implemented successfully in the classroom:

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- After a class viewing of *Blood is Blood*, and some preliminary discussion about conflict and videopoetry (see the website for specific activities), have students, in groups, create a two-voice videopoem based on a conflict that is pertinent to them — personal, societal, historical, literary. In Canada, students could explore the French-English conflict, for example. Or, students could illustrate a conflict between two characters in the class novel. Organize a class screening or make a film festival out of it.
- For more advanced students: Read the text version of *Blood is Blood* as a class but do not show the videopoem. Divide the class into groups of four or five. Divide up the poem into sections of three or four pages each, and distribute a section to each group. Give students time to study the text using activities from the website. Then invite each group to create the videopoem of their section. Organize a class screening of the student projects and then view the original videopoem as a class. Follow up with a discussion of creative process. What artistic choices did they make and why? How are their choices different or similar to those in the original?

Conclusion

“The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world,” said American writer James Baldwin. We believe that art has a key role to play in the classroom. Used effectively, it is a powerful springboard to discussions of social justice, a way to encourage and motivate students to stand up for causes and issues that mean something to them, whatever they happen to be. As a work of art, *Blood is Blood* might not radically alter the map in the Middle East, at least not anytime soon, but its emphasis on the importance of dialogue in conflict resolution, both articulated in the poem and by way of example through the creative collaboration between artists with opposing views, will — we hope and believe — give students much to process and think about.

ENDRE FARKAS was born in Hungary. He escaped during the 1956 Hungarian uprising, and settled in Montreal. He has published 11 books of poetry and plays. His work has been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Slovenian and Turkish. He has read and performed widely in Canada, the United States, Latin America, and Europe, and has created pieces that have toured the country and abroad. He is the two-time regional winner of the CBC Poetry "Face Off" Competition. His play, *Haunted House*, based on the life and work of the poet A.M. Klein, was produced in Montreal in February 2009.

CAROLYN MARIE SOUAID is a Montreal-based poet. She is the author of seven books of poetry and the editor of over a dozen. From 2008 to 2011 she served as poetry editor for Signature Editions, one of Canada's top poetry publishers. She has toured her work across Canada, in the U.S. and in Europe, and has been shortlisted for a number of awards including the A.M. Klein Prize and the Pat Lowther Memorial Award. In 1996, she won the David McKeen Award for *Swimming into the Light*. Her work focuses on pivotal moments in Québécois history and on the difficult bridging of worlds (English/French; Native/non-Native).

To arrange a classroom visit: endregfarkas@gmail.com.