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THE NEXT 7 DAYS: EVENTS (50) + OPENINGS (27) + DEADLINES (6) + CLOSINGS (23)

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STAN DOUGLAS AT CANADIAN STAGE | ALEESA COHENE, SHARY BOYLE & EMILY VEY DUKE AT OAKVILLE GALLERIES

October 21, 2014



Like 1

For a guy who aligned himself with Samuel Beckett early in his career, **Stan Douglas** avoids the modernist celebration of delay in his first foray into theatre – *Helen Lawrence* at **Canadian Stage** – and sets his narrative on full throttle from the first scene to the final (which happens to happen on a speeding train). Any distance between audience and actors that works around and against the artifice of a bunch of people standing twenty feet in front of you yet pretending to be in a completely different world is left behind with the introduction of a thin scrim on which the action is projected with all the necessary close-ups, dramatic angles, and quick cuts of the film noir cinema that the play so relentlessly pays tribute to. And while the story – scripted by veteran TV drama screenwriter **Chris Haddock** – is intricate and compelling, sharp and snappy, smart and entertaining, and the assembled product on the screen is a seamless homage, the lingering question – aside from what becomes of Percy the Bookie – is why didn't Douglas just make it a film in the first place.



Stan Douglas, *Helen Lawrence*

Douglas has distinguished himself as an artist of note for his complex interweaving of form and content in video and film installations, as well as being a photographer who captures historical shifts through large-scale landscapes that are either unpopulated or carefully choreographed recreations of past events. The historical elements is clearly in place here with post-war Vancouver serving as a setting for a selection of transitioning souls – recovering veterans, displaced Americans, temporary residents, everyone, as Douglas points out in playbill, in the process of forging their future. How this links to the multimedia rendition that makes use of a blue-screen set to place the live actors in computer generated settings before our very eyes is less intriguing than in earlier works by the artist – such as his dual film projector works *Der Sandmann* and *Inconsolable Memories* – where the slight tear in the medium's fabric becomes equivalent to the literal tear in the historical discourse being presented. Those gallery installations function like puzzles where one only catches fleeting glimpses of resolution while the machine, the representational apparatus, stays endlessly in motion (looping or sometimes even generating variations that stretch over days). The technical conceit of this play that constantly draws one back to the artifice of the play as well as serving as a metaphor for the characters' projection of themselves into the world is too easily forgotten in the forward thrust of the plot and ends up

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merely a gimmick to make the theatrical experience more cinematic. It's a move I'm guessing Beckett would disapprove.



Aleesa Cohene, *That's Why We End*, 2014



The slippery slide of narrative and self-identity is also in full effect at **Oakville Galleries** where **Aleesa Cohene's** multipart video installation takes the trope of therapist and client to dramatize in an elliptical fashion the subtle wrestling match slash slow dance of performative reflection (tied in this instance to a dreamlike succession of female actors from cinema's past who populate our unconscious) we go through when preparing to plumb our depths. Each viewing station has one set of headphones and one specially selected chair, which delays the gallery visit if there happens to be more than a couple people present but also serves to invite the viewer into the equation and imply that something of the passive-aggressive back-and-forth in the psychoanalytic session also plays out between artist or artwork and no-longer-detached observer. In fact, all Cohene's works in this exhibition are the products of collaboration; the most dramatic of which must be the dance performances by **Mairi Grieg** that take place occasionally in the gallery (the next two are on November 16 and December 13).

Oakville's other exhibition space features the results of another collaboration. This one is a decade-long correspondence between **Emily Vey Duke** and **Shary Boyle** wherein the former has supplied words in the form of an epic poem detailing the conflicts between nature and culture, youth and adulthood, male and female, morality and freedom, etc. played out in a twisted fantasy starring a pair of lost souls named Bloodie and Peg-Leg, and the latter has replied with a suitably evocative series of illustrations that serve to reinforce the storybook-like appearance of the project while also highlighting the psychosexual dynamics at work vis-à-vis naked wild boys and rainbow menstruating girls. The extent of the artists' vision is fully formed and enveloping (reminiscent at times of Henry Darger's equally lurid myths) and I hope they eventually assemble this into hard-bound book with full colour prints that I can curl up with on my couch and read to the neighbourhood children when they drop by for a visit (on second thought, scratch that last point).

Canadian Stage: <https://www.canadianstage.com/online/helen>

Stan Douglas: Helen Lawrence continues until November 2.

Oakville Galleries: <http://www.oakvillegalleries.com/>

Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know continues until January 4.

Shary Boyle & Emily Vey Duke: The Illuminations Project continues until January 4.

Terence Dick is a freelance writer living in Toronto. His art criticism has appeared in Canadian Art, BorderCrossings, Prefix Photo, Camera Austria, Fuse, Mix, C Magazine, Azure, and The Globe and Mail. He is the editor of Akimblog. You can follow his quickie reviews and art news announcements on Twitter [@TerenceDick](https://twitter.com/TerenceDick).

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