

Ghostly tour not for faint of heart



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STREET STAGE Actor has carved out a role as keeper of the dark, 400-year history of Old Montreal

Donovan King is one of the scariest guys in Montreal theatre. The streets are his stage. Cyberspace, too. An actor and teacher, King has carved out a role for himself as both keeper of the city's dark underbelly, and challenger of the status quo.

Every Saturday night from spring to fall, he shoves a bowler hat over his ears and slips into a stern black suit to become Professor Beeblebock, everyman's guide to the gruesome past of Old Montreal. The union card-carrying actor works for Fantômes Montréal Ghosts, an enterprise offering walking tours in English and French.

Six-foot tall with a ringing baritone, he's an imposing presence on the neon-lit cobblestone streets. In a made-up accent somewhere between TV-Transylvania and BBC posh, he delivers his followers a meaty, 90-minute lecture on key dastardly moments in the neighbourhood's 400-year history.

Last weekend, I joined some 30 tourists and a few native Montrealers for the after-dark event. Among the crowd were a bright-eyed girl of about 9 and her younger brother, each hanging on a parent. An hour on, at the part where Donovan described a starving street person of the 1800s falling into a sewer of rancid butchery castoffs, the girl was crouched in her father's embrace, eyes closed, fingers in her ears; the boy, wide-eyed and hungry for more. Whether either of them slept that night is anybody's guess. The mad professor made no concessions to tender sensibilities.

Standing on the very spot where a mob gathered to rush the Parliament Buildings and burn the place down in 1849 while the actor conjured their fury was a gripping experience. Embellished by King's performance, the material is entertaining, and subversive. Ghosts figure in his tales, but what resonates is the chilly picture of our bloody past, one that pretty well demolishes the dazzling facade of gentrification.

By day, King teaches history at the High School of Montreal and acting at Montreal Children's Theatre, balancing film contracts and performance in several large-scale theatrical pageants. After years with the St. Jean Baptiste Day celebration, he has worked his way up to playing the Bonhomme de neige.

"A lot of anglos think it's impossible to break into francophone cultural institutions, but it's just a matter of staying power," he says.

He's also an active member of the annual Infringement Festival, which he founded with Jason C. McLean and Gary St. Laurent in 2004. A



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multi-disciplinary event for activist art that challenges what organizers describe as the "commodification of culture," the Infringement has spread to Ottawa, Toronto, Buffalo, Regina and Brooklyn. Alternate theatre, they argue, has taken on all the trappings of what it once set out to oppose, instead offering a repertory of crowd-pleasing tales and devoting too much time to the scramble for corporate sponsors and grants.

A self-described "performance activist," King has a lot of sympathy for the Occupy Wall Street movement. Harking back to the days of Refus Global, the famous 1948 manifesto from Quebec artists decrying the stifling impact of church and state on social mores, King says contemporary Quebec's liberalism sometimes makes it hard for artists to get a grip on what they should be rebelling against. Personally, he doesn't have that problem.

"Art is not supposed to be safe," he says. "Safe art is boring art. It might please the senses but doesn't challenge the spectator in any way." Challenge is what King does best, spending many hours a week on a blizzard of densely argued emails sent out to anyone he feels can benefit from being challenged.

At 39, Donovan King has lost none of the fire of youth. But neither has he avoided the hard work of amassing formal credentials. He has an MFA in theatre studies, a BA in drama and education, a BA in education and a diplôme d'Études Collégiales in acting. He's also the author of *Optative Theatre: A Critical Theory*. A hectic life, juggling roles, staying on the edge.

So what's Professor Beeblebock doing for Halloween? Door locked, lights out: he's premiering *Haunted Mountain*, his personally researched and conducted ghostly tour of Mount Royal, a 90-minute sashay through the graveyards and haunted hollows of the downtown landmark.

The tour starts at Barfly, 4262 St. Laurent Blvd., at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$15 and can be reserved by sending King an email at optatif@gmail.com. Children are welcome, but advised to bring earplugs.