



## *Myrmidon: Reflections on an Enigmatic Legacy*

*Love is about life and so is death...it's quite a ride on this little boat.*  
– Ryan Kerr, Director of *Myrmidon*

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Myrmidon was written by Bernie Martin, directed by Ryan Kerr and performed by Kate Story and Curtis Driedger, with design by Martha Cockshutt at the Theatre on King, November 30-December 3 2016.

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### *Bernie Martin: Prolific Creativity*

“There’s something in the throat” performer Kate Story says as she gently touches her neck, perched on the edge of a blue Newfoundland dory, in *Myrmidon*, landlocked in a black box theatre at Peterborough’s Theatre on King. *Myrmidon* is the final performance of a two month long interdisciplinary arts festival in the playwright’s name. A Certain Place: The Bernie Martin Festival was conceived and created by two local artists and tours de force Kate Story, and Ryan Kerr.

Bernie Martin, who passed away in 1995, lived an enigmatic life, producing artistic work for over forty years in relative obscurity, outside of mainstream markets, and arts funding infrastructure in the Peterborough and London/St. Thomas regions. Martin worked in a vast range of media as a painter, playwright, songwriter, singer, musician, poet, writer, and puppeteer. Kate Story describes Martin’s legacy: “he had a real impact on this relatively tiny area and group of individuals and artists in lots of different media.” Martin did not seek external validation to legitimate his prolific artistic production, rather he continued to create regardless of whether his work was formerly recognized or accepted by institutions and publics.

### *Regionalism & Legacy*

When asked about the impetus for A Certain Place: The Bernie Martin Festival, Kate Story describes Bernie Martin’s continued relevance. “It’s more the spirit in which he made work, and the sheer volume of the work he made, and the number of disciplines that impresses me, also the fact that his work continues to speak to people.” Story reveals the qualities of much of Martin’s work, “there is sort of a misty nostalgia that can come up now. But really most of his work is weirdly startling, and difficult.” It is perhaps the difficulty of Martin’s work, his complex language and impenetrable narratives, which were responsible for his limited reach and renewed cultural interest and significance. In other words – if Martin’s work had been too accessible, it may have been forgotten by now, as so many other artists’ works have been.

Martin passed away in 1995 before ever seeing *Myrmidon* performed. Interpreting Martin’s work brings us face to face with the question of what role regionalism plays in the formation of artistic legacy. It asks us to examine the ways in which artistic production outside of mainstream centres often escapes canonization and archiving, and what affect this may have on collective cultural memories in places such as

Peterborough. Story cites this question as one of the driving forces behind creating the festival and expresses her concerns: “you know a lot of artists work and make work and you know don’t ever get much beyond a local milieu, and I think that’s just fine on one level, but on the other level kind of heartbreaking.” In many ways *A Certain Place: The Bernie Martin festival* has acted as a defacto archival device, not only by imprinting Martin’s legacy on the local cultural consciousness, but by building a digital infrastructure for Martin’s prolific artistic production where there was once but a trace.

### *Remounting Myrmidon: An Ongoing Life*

*Myrmidon* was originally performed in Peterborough in 1995. Ryan Kerr, Martha Cockshutt and Curtis Driedger were all involved in the original performance at the Union Theatre with Driedger performing, Cockshutt doing costume and set design, and Kerr lighting design. “It was the last show that Bernie wrote before he passed, and the show was done in the year after he passed and so everything was sort of fresh and new so everything was very present” says director Ryan Kerr. Kate Story also recalls: “I remember that there were so many people that were so much closer to Bernie than I was, and he had died so recently so it was very charged.”

Kerr comments on remounting the production almost twenty years after the original. The 1995 production of *Myrmidon*, falling in the wake of Martin’s death, resonated much like a memorial piece. Kerr explains his need to create a new world for the current iteration: “It’s very different than the original production. It’s much more universal. People can identify with the bigger themes.” With almost two decades between Martin’s death and the remount, Kerr has crafted a less personal production, connected to *Myrmidon*’s central themes, and has seized the opportunity to highlight the humour in the work. “I mean don’t get me wrong, as a memorial piece, you’re not looking for humour you’re looking at getting it right,” says Kerr of 1995 Union Theatre production.

### *Myrmidon: Mortality, Loss, and Love*

The desire to re-inscribe history or re-embodiment creative work ties in with the central themes of mortality which resurface throughout *Myrmidon*. Story traces these themes to the circumstances in which the play was written, “he wrote it knowing he had terminal cancer, and the piece is imbued with that”. At one point in the production, Story’s character recites one of a series of love poems stating: “All the possibilities that you thought you had...and what you have is that you lose the illusion of self as separate, and what is left is the present.” There is a sense not only of longing and letting go, but of frustration and forgiveness that permeates *Myrmidon*. “It’s really just about being alive” declares Story. “The absurdity of the human condition. Just how ridiculous we are how ridiculous our attempts to do anything can be” she says assuredly. Just as Bernie Martin’s creative work acts as a catalyst to draw out broader themes of regionalism and the arts in the context of the festival, the protagonist’s journey in *Myrmidon* unveils the key themes of mortality and loss. As designer Martha Cockshutt puts it: “It’s interesting because we’re addressing huge themes, but ultimately in a very personal kind of way.”

Like many artists Martin uses poetic language, fairytales and humour to get at some of the most difficult parts of being alive. Cockshutt describes the importance of addressing universal themes via personal storytelling and embedding that knowing into her overall design approach in *Myrmidon*. “What I was trying to do is move it into *no space*” she explains. “The idea of ‘it could be anywhere, it could be anytime’” she adds. Cockshutt is exactly right in that the non-specific nature of the costuming and set design means that *Myrmidon* drifts somewhere beyond the restrictive guideposts of the time period and setting into a more ethereal, nebulous and almost dream-like space.

The blurred nature of the basic tenets of ‘here’ and ‘there,’ now’ and ‘then’ are iterations of the edgeless divisions between true and false in *Myrmidon*, and the ‘truth in falsity’ on which the majority of storytelling hinges. As audience members we have very little ground to stand on – none in fact. The audience, like Story’s character, is set adrift on a river, gliding through a looping and seemingly formless narrative structure. Kerr concurs adding: “It’s hard to tell what’s true and what’s false in the story because at the beginning the character says we only tell the truth here – the boat is red (but the boat is actually blue) so automatically you’re in a make-believe world.” The blending of true and false by the protagonist underscores the nebulous nature of the narrative itself. The only anchor in *Myrmidon* is the audience, the story itself hinges on the simple fact that it is being told to an audience, in a theatre, in a specific space and time.

#### *Audience Reception: The Aging and the Ageless*

*Myrmidon*’s themes of morality, dying, and running out of time means the work is read by different audiences in different ways. “When I approached it the first time I would have been in my mid-twenties and you look at things very differently when you’re mid-twenties than you do when you’re in your mid-forties” admits Kerr. He points at a gap between how young audience members and older audience members might experience *Myrmidon*, or rather how the immediacy human mortality varies for each of us, not only based on age but on life experience, and circumstance. In many ways, while writing *Myrmidon* Martin was in the position of a relatively young person, in his early fifties, writing on the brink of death, with the fears and feelings of an older generation. Kerr speaks about how the recurring theme of mortality has affected the original cast and crew differently twenty years later: “when you’re an older artist you pick your way through the script in a different way and you can see the bigger themes and you can see things that might escape a younger artist” Kerr explains. He admits that when he speaks to young audiences about *Myrmidon* they notice different elements: the skills of the performers, the lighting, design and so on. In contrast he points out that older audiences often respond directly to the themes: mortality, what’s real and what’s not, and what the narrator is running from—fear. Kerr, reminds us, however, that “as much as it’s about the fear of death and escaping death as it is about acknowledging life passing, so in that sense there’s an homage paid to love and how important it is.”

#### *Myrmidon: Final Reflections*

In many ways *Myrmidon* is the crystalization of disparate elements of Martin's artistic practice. As Kerr states it: "you could see his whole life condensed in a way in this little show." There is a potency to this type of artistic distillation that is often palpable to audiences. There is also a cautioning, and an embedded morality to the play. As Story describes, "it's kind of a teaching piece for me about how to live, how to be alive – how to notice what matters and not really get lost these miserable details." Perhaps Martin was trying to remind us that life will always reveal challenges, that the river on which we live our lives will continue to flow, and as Kerr reminds us: "those dark passages that we all have to go through to make it through on the other side" will always be there. Perhaps the final thought Martin leaves us with is that our ultimate act in this life is to witness each other in the act of storytelling, and to live in the nebulous spaces between falsity and truth, knowing that our role as witness is our only constant –our only proof of being alive.