

**Show Transcript**  
**Deconstructing Dinner**  
**Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY**  
**Nelson, B.C. Canada**

**September 16, 2010**

**Title: Packaged Foods Exposed V (Unilever 3 Years Later) / Unequal Harvest**

**Producer/Host: Jon Steinman**  
**Transcript: Mary-Elizabeth Dill**

*Jon Steinman:* And welcome once again to Deconstructing Dinner - produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman and today we revisit with a popular series that has regrettably not received much attention as of late - Packaged Foods Exposed - a series that was launched in 2006 to explore the largest manufacturers of processed foods in the country and a series which takes an often overlooked and critical perspective of these powerful companies.

We've analyzed the likes of Nestle, PepsiCo and Kraft and when we last aired this series, a two-part feature of a comparatively unknown company: Unilever. With three years having now transpired since that exposé, it appears that the company is in much need of some more deconstructing, and in particular, some of their questionable marketing strategies.

It was following that September 2007 exposé when Deconstructing Dinner filed a complaint with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and Advertising Standards Canada. That complaint did result in the company making changes, but, it appears that that change was short-lived and the company continues to (as we're about to allege) fraudulently market some of their products.

And following that Unilever feature, a visit with an excellent theatrical performance titled Unequal Harvest - a series of monologues written by Geoff Hughes examining some of the root causes of hunger and food injustice taking place around the world. Deconstructing Dinner's Andrea Langlois sat down with Winnipeg's Kami Desilets and Brent Hirose while they were preparing to perform Unequal Harvest at the Victoria Fringe Festival.

**increase music and fade out**

*JS:* While food and beverage giants like Kraft, Nestle or Coca-Cola often market the name of their company alongside their products, one company who has seemingly taken a more subtle approach is the UK and Netherlands based Unilever - one of the largest manufacturers of home cleaning, personal care and food products. Instead of actively marketing the Unilever name, the company instead puts much more emphasis on marketing their brands: perhaps so much so that their brands are seemingly sometimes

perceived as companies themselves. The most popular of their food brands being Becel, Ben & Jerry's, Bertolli, Blue Bonnet, Breyers, Hellmans, Knorr, I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, Imperial, Klondike, Lipton, Popsicle, Ragu, Red Rose, Salada, Skippy and Slim Fast.

Created in 1930 following the merger of Lever Brothers and Margarine Unie, Unilever splits its headquarters between Rotterdam and London. Their Canadian operations headquartered in Toronto. Globally Unilever employs 163,000 people with products sold in 174 countries. In 2009, the company reported \$40 billion dollars in revenues and 3.7 billion in net income. Unilever is the largest purchaser of black tea in the world and has long been the world's major purchaser of vegetable oils for their line of margarines, mayonnaise and personal care products.

But similar to Unilever's big food counterparts, the company has not operated without controversy - some of which we examined back in 2007.

Being the world's first major margarine producer, the company was, in its early days starting in 1878 through 1960, using whale oil as the primary ingredient in their products. According to a 1940 book published about the whale oil industry, Unilever was the world's largest whale oil purchaser at that time. Today, despite a few controversial resisters, whales are no longer permitted to be harvested, but at that time when that book was published, floating whale factories in one year processed over 6,000 blue whales, 18,000 finback whales, over 2,000 humpback whales and over 2500 sperm whales. Eventually, populations became so low that a global ban on commercial whaling came into effect in 1986.

But did Unilever's practices of pillaging the oceans change? Apparently not. Between 1957 and 2006 Unilever operated a thriving frozen fish division, but spent its later years fighting accusations that they were purchasing illegally fished cod from populations in the Baltic Sea which were on the verge of collapse and under protection.

Today, Unilever continues to be targeted for its long history of purchasing palm oil from plantations that are alleged to contribute to rainforest deforestation. In March 2001, Unilever was reported to have illegally dumped mercury waste in a heavily-populated community in India and here in Canada, in that same year, Unilever released their Pro-Activ margarine onto the Canadian market without proper approval from Health Canada.

But that last example, perhaps not nearly as serious as the others, helps introduce one of the focuses of today's revisiting of the company as it was another new margarine product the company introduced this year that helped spark today's episode. To provide some context, Deconstructing Dinner has maintained a bi-monthly column for the past few years in the Vancouver Island-based Synergy Magazine. It's an independent publication operated by farmers Nicole Shaw and Dirk Becker and it's also one that focuses its content and advertising on anything but the status quo.

With Synergy referring to itself as The Magazine Dedicated to Mindful Living, it came as a shock, when in May of this year, the back cover was taken up with a full-page ad paid for by Unilever – a company who appears to be anything but mindful. The ad was for their new Vegan Becel Margarine and as was later discovered, the ad ended up in the magazine through some rather sneaky tactics employed by the agency booking the ad. But before getting into those details here's publisher and editor Nicole Shaw speaking to Deconstructing Dinner from her office in Lantzville British Columbia.

*Nichole Shaw:* Synergy magazine is a local, grassroots publication that is dedicated to mindful living, which means encouraging people to live more consciously in all areas of their life. So, for example, Dirk and I, we try to live as much in alignment with our words and our actions as we possibly can and so by publishing this magazine we basically encourage others to do the same. There are articles on environmental issues, bringing to light local and global issues, also health and wellness is a major component, local food, even spirituality.

*JS:* Like many publications, Synergy relies primarily on advertising revenues to cover costs, but with its strong values in place, Synergy would usually not provide space for an ad by a company like Unilever. Nevertheless, somehow, that ad made it onto the back-cover of the May/June issue in the form of a Becel margarine ad.

Nicole Shaw explains how that all transpired.

*Nichole Shaw:* Most magazines, I'd say, spend over 80% of their time looking for advertizing and then the remaining twenty on putting together the magazine. Whereas we're pretty well the opposite. We spend about 80%, if not 90, choosing articles that are right in alignment with our magazine, with the quality of writing that our readership has come to expect. And so with advertising a lot of it is from local businesses that are either environmentally minded, sustainability minded, or they're in the health and wellness industry so they're message therapists, chiropractors and being a grassroots publication quite often Dirk and I are putting our own money in just to get the printing done. And so we do deal with a couple of different advertizing agencies that call us up when they think they have a client that they think is in alignment with our magazine.

In this particular case, the woman that phoned from the advertizing agency - it was an agency we hadn't dealt with previously - and she was actually quite aggressive on the phone, so when I asked what the ad was for, her client was launching a brand new product and she was hesitant to say what it was and didn't want to let the cat out of the bag, she insisted that it had to do with the health and wellness industry – which I was like 'Ok, no problem' - and I drew up the contract, sent it to her, and we were getting very close to the publication date at this point and when she sent it back to me that's when I found out it was a Becel ad for a new vegan margarine.

So I sat back in my chair, turned around to Dirk, and said: 'Oh my gosh, its Unilever – what do we do?' We were already so far into that particular issue, edition of the magazine that we were pretty well at a break even point. And so we both phoned a few friends,

phoned some activists that we know, asking peoples' opinion, 'What should we do, What should we do, How would you take it?'. It was quite a mixed reaction from people, some people said 'No, don't do it' - which was, of course, my gut reaction - and then the other reaction was that because the numbers weren't adding up for that addition, you know, this was over a thousand dollars worth. We ended up just kind of biting the bullet. We thought, you know, what's the worst that can happen, it will actually create conversation as to why this is not an appropriate ad for the magazine.

*JS:* When that May/June issue of Synergy Magazine hit the streets, there wasn't an overwhelming response from readers to the presence of that Becel ad, but there were no doubt a few letters sent and it was those letters that led Synergy to contact Deconstructing Dinner.

*Nicole Shaw:* Their concern was that Synergy was going to sell out to the multinational corporations etcetera, as other publications have been tempted in the past. And so, in order to put their fears at ease, that's when I thought, I'd check in with you.

*JS:* Helping provide balance to the Unilever Becel ad, I was asked to author an exposé on the company for their September/October issue and as luck would have it, Deconstructing Dinner had already spent considerable time investigating this company for our September 2007 Packaged Foods Exposed series. Because the impetus for the article was an advertisement paid for by Unilever, it seemed only fitting to focus the four-page article on the company's marketing strategies.

That was a partial focus of the 2007 episodes when we narrowed in on the company's Breyers brand of frozen desserts and ice creams. You might recall a visit we made to the brand's Canadian website on which we noticed a glaring error - an error we've since comfortably come to believe was no error at all, and instead a very targeted strategy. You see according to Canadian regulations, in order to label an ice cream as ice cream, the contents must contain a specified percentage of solids derived from milk fat. Failure to meet that criteria results in the product having to instead be labelled as Frozen Dessert.

Now the presence of frozen desserts in Canadian grocery store freezers has certainly increased. Today, while Canadians might believe we're eating ice cream, more and more often we're eating what looks like ice cream - but instead does not contain any milk nor cream. Replacing that milk and cream are what are known as modified milk ingredients and vegetable oils among other hard to pronounce names. But the packaging and the marketing of those products stays the same (except, of course, for the small and required text on the containers that reads "frozen dessert").

Perhaps the best case in point is Breyers "Classic" line of products with their familiar blue containers. In my years speaking across the country about this, I'm quite comfortable to suggest that by far most Canadians appear to believe that those products are indeed ice cream (as they once were), when in fact nothing today could be further from the truth. Of the 15 flavours making up Breyers Classic line, 14 of them are

classified as Frozen Dessert, leaving only one that is permitted to be labelled as Ice-Cream/Sherbet.

And it was this among other things that led to that complaint we made to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency back in 2007, because upon visiting the Breyers Canada website at the time, their main page was made up of a number of different product categories, with the first one reading “Packaged Ice Cream.” Yet nowhere else on the page was there a category for “Frozen Dessert.” Lo and behold, upon selecting the Packaged Ice Cream heading, it became clear, located under that heading was Breyers extensive line of Frozen Desserts, clearly a deceptive tactic to convince Canadians that all Breyers products are ice cream.

Deconstructing Dinner ended up contacting the CFIA and we were told that we should file a complaint with Advertising Standards Canada - an industry-funded watchdog that was set up for companies to monitor themselves. But despite their industry-funding, sure enough, two weeks later, Breyers changed that heading to read “Frozen Desserts,” choosing to instead lump their ice creams under that new heading.

Fast-forward to today, three years later, has Unilever tidied up its practices? Not at all.

Upon arriving at the now revamped Breyers Canada website visitors are offered a few options, one of which a heading reading: “Our Story.” Now keeping in mind the Breyers Classic line of products is no longer legally permitted to be called ice cream in Canada, you’ll be shocked (or not) to hear what their website currently reads upon selecting that heading. It reads, “The Breyers brand has grown significantly in recent years as new products have joined the flagship Breyers Classic Ice Cream line.”

As far as Deconstructing Dinner is concerned, that’s fraudulent advertising by all accounts and we’ve since filed a complaint with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

Canadians will also notice upon visiting the Breyers Canada website, a welcome screen that reads, “It’s time to love ice cream with the carefree joy of a kid again.” Yet another rather misleading statement when the majority of Breyers products listed on that website are not ice cream at all.

### **soundbite**

*JS:* Now that statement on the Breyers Canada website was the basis of only one of a number of complaints that Deconstructing Dinner has since filed with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (the CFIA). I should add that we did contact Unilever extending an invite to them to lend their voice to the show but received no response.

But it’s this next complaint that we filed that is perhaps the most interesting as it involves a strategy by Unilever that goes well beyond website advertising and instead involves the company’s packaging of their products. In particular is the Breyers line of Smooth and Dreamy ice creams and frozen desserts. Now unlike their Classic line, the Smooth and Dreamy line does include some products classified as ice cream, however, the majority of

Smooth and Dreamy products are not permitted to be labelled as such and instead are required to be labelled as frozen dessert. Why? Because those products contain no milk and no cream, thereby making them fall short of that requirement described earlier. Yet emblazoned on those products including the ones without cream, is a logo which reads “Cream” - raising the question, just how could a company be legally allowed to label a product as containing cream, when in fact, there’s no cream in the product at all.

Well looking closer at that Cream logo, one might notice some significantly smaller text placed underneath the word and much less noticeable. Underneath the word Cream reads “press system.” So what is a “Cream Press System” - emphasis of course on the Cream. Well according to the company’s website the Cream Press System is a “breakthrough process which splits up the creaminess of ice cream into tinier droplets and spreads them out.”

So that raises two concerns. The first: how could a company get away with placing this Cream Press System on a product that is not permitted be called ice cream in Canada and yet describe the process as being one that’s applied to ice cream? And the second and more serious question: is a company legally permitted to place on the package of a food product an indication that is suggestive that something might be in the product when in fact it’s not?

Now of course Unilever would likely argue that the logo does not read Cream but reads Cream Press System, but as far as Deconstructing Dinner is concerned, the small press system font provides ample reason to raise the red flags which we’ve done through a complaint to the CFIA. That complaint references Canada’s Consumer Packaging & Labelling Act, which reads this, “False or misleading representation includes: any expression, word, figure, depiction or symbol that implies or may reasonably be regarded as implying that a pre-packaged product contains any matter not contained in it or does not contain any matter in fact contained in it.”

You can take a look at an image of one of the Breyers products in question posted on the Deconstructing Dinner website at [deconstructingdinner.ca](http://deconstructingdinner.ca) and the September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 broadcast.

### **soundbite**

*JS:* So that’s complaint number two made to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency about Unilever’s questionable marketing strategies.

Complaints three and four involve another Unilever product: Becel margarine.

*Becel Commercial:* Follow it, break it, change it, don’t do it if it’s not in it. Get it pumping, pour out to someone, keep your loved ones close to it, whether its cold, warm, or made of stone. Take good care of it. Exercise and listen to it. It’s the most important thing you’ll ever own. Becel: Love Your Heart.

*JS:* Instead of filing complaint about a specific Becel product, what Deconstructing Dinner has filed is a complaint about is the very foundation of the Becel marketing machine and Unilever's strategy to promote Becel as a healthy choice for Canadians concerned about the health of their hearts. A pretty lucrative market today.

A visit to the [becel.ca](http://becel.ca) website reveals this very comprehensive strategy – a strategy we first outlined back in 2007 when their website at that point was making very direct connections between their product's ability to seemingly relieve anger and stress, so long as you of course use Becel margarine when preparing foods. Those similar connections are still being made on their website today. The site is more an extensive database offering tips and advice on health and well-being than it is a place outlining their products.

But is this strategy manipulative and deceptive? Well, Deconstructing Dinner thinks so, and we believe it's grossly irresponsible to market a single food as a preventable measure for heart disease or as a contributor to heart health. Canadian regulations seem to agree. According to Canada's Guide to Food Labelling & Advertising, "The use of the terms "heart healthy eating" or "heart healthy diet" on the labels and/or in the advertisements for specific foods may give an erroneous impression about the merit or value of the subject food(s). Objection is taken to the use of these terms in association with individual foods."

Perhaps the most glaring example that Deconstructing Dinner has come across that we believe is not in accordance with this section is found on the main page of the Becel website. It's a graphic that reads "Helping improve the heart health of Canadians." Beside the text: an image of a Becel container of margarine.

So, that's complaint number three.

Complaint number four gets right to the "heart" of it: the Becel logo, and their Love Your Heart slogan. The familiar Becel logo is, quite simply, a heart. Well, that too might not be in accordance with Canada's Guide to Food Labelling & Advertising and in particular section 8.14 which reads "The use of heart symbols to describe a food are generally not acceptable. They may give an erroneous impression that consuming a single food or menu selection will provide heart health or prevent heart disease." As for the slogan, "Love Your Heart," well, that section of the Guide also reads, "Objection is taken to the use of terms employing the word "heart" such as "heart beat," "whole hearted" and "heart smart" to describe individual foods."

So those four complaints have all been filed with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. We did invite someone from the CFIA to help inform us of how the agency enforces these laws and follows through which these types of complaints, but despite over a week's worth of trying to get someone on the line, the CFIA was unable to provide a spokesperson with that knowledge. Our invite to the CFIA still stands and we'll likely get someone on the line soon to explain how these types of complaints are followed up on

and enforced and you can also of course stay tuned to the show to learn more about the outcomes of this CFIA investigation.

And to end this first segment of the show, I have here what is today, a pretty entertaining clip from a television commercial produced in what appears to be the late 1980s. The commercial is for Breyers ice cream and quite effectively demonstrates the departure that the brand took from its ice cream roots to what in Canada must now be referred to as frozen dessert with its accompanying modified milk ingredients, vegetable oils and other hard-to-pronounce ingredients.

*Breyers commercial:* Before you eat your ice cream: read it! Aluminium bicarbonate, sodium alginate, polysorbate 80. Breyers ice cream is very easy to read: like delicious Breyers strawberries. Just four natural ingredients: churned milk, fresh cream, sugar, and strawberries. Sodium phosphate, malic acid, locust beans. Breyers the all natural ice cream, it's good reading. Locust beans?

*JS:* A visitor to the Breyers Canada website today reveals a much different reality than the one the Breyers brand was once living in. Today, as an example, under the ingredients of Breyers Classic Strawberry Frozen Dessert: hydrogenated coconut oil and polysorbate 80. Making up Breyers Maple Sugar Crunch - Ammonium & Calcium Alginate, Malic Acid, and, wait for it: locust beans.

### **soundbite**

*JS:* This is Deconstructing Dinner - if you've missed any of today's broadcast it is archived online at [deconstructingdinner.ca](http://deconstructingdinner.ca) and the September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2010 broadcast. You'll also find there the original article I authored for Synergy Magazine that led to this episode and that article includes some supporting images of the various complaints that have now since been filed with the CFIA.

In our next segment we move away from questionable marketing strategies but remain firmly planted in the subject of food injustice. Winnipeg playwright Geoff Hughes has brought food injustice to the stage. In 2008, three non-profit organizations: The Canadian Foodgrains Bank, the Manitoba Food Charter and Winnipeg Harvest resolved to draw attention to the Global Food Crisis by commissioning Geoff to write and direct the original work Unequal Harvest. Debuting in Winnipeg on World Food Day in 2008, the play continues to be performed across Canada including its latest stop at the 2010 Victoria Fringe Festival held in August and September.

Deconstructing Dinner's Andrea Langlois caught up with performers Kami Desilets and Brent Hirose during a rehearsal in Victoria. Andrea recorded a few of the monologues performed as part of the work and later sat down with both performers to learn more about what motivated Unequal Harvest. In this first monologue we'll listen to, the story begins by a recounting of a man's childhood when he and his father once fished for a living. But that, was before the flooding.



*Unequal Harvest:* So, what happened to the lake? While one way to put it is Manitoba Hydro happened to the lake. Let me explain. Now, in the 60s everybody said that hydro electricity was the cleanest, safest way to, you know, keep the lights from going out. So, Manitoba Hydro and the government said they wanted to build a new hydro dam up here to make more electricity. They studied what would happen if they let the water go up ten meters. They knew what it would do to us. The report said that they would turn this lake into the largest man-made swamp in the world.

So you know what they did? They didn't show us the report. Oh, we forced them to admit it later. They were pretty sneaky, eh. We didn't need to read a university paper to know what they were doing was wrong. Our people we understand that the lake is life. If it dies, so does their people. Anyways. New government got elected, passed a new law, and hydro built the new dam and the water started to go up. It's a pretty sad time in our lives, watching the water come up over the rocks, making the beach disappear. We protested, but in the end we had no say. No real consultation, just seemed to happen.

Water went up three metres. I guess they thought that much would be okay. See that over there? Those sticks poking out of the water? See that's what's left of a tree that got drowned when the lake came up. They call 'em hydro fish. They break off, get caught in the nets, mess 'em up real bad nets, so grab them by the boat, eh. Anyways. Life got pretty hard after all the flooding. The water wasn't the only thing that went up. So did the mercury levels. Poisoning most of the fish. Downgraded their quality too. We still ate whatever we could catch, can't go hungry. They took away the buffalo, they took away the fish, next thing you know they're going to take away our TV dinners! I can't raise umpteen kids on frozen food. Its hard to get good food up here. I know you don't buy the groceries yet, but they charge you \$5 for a tomato.

Anyway, not long after that a lot of people started to depend on welfare. So, in '92 we sued the government and Manitoba Hydro and we won. We got \$18 million dollars. I know it sounds like a lot, but hundreds of people have to split it. So in the end there was 12,000 a head. A lot of people started to move away 'cause they couldn't live off the lake no more. We took our money and moved to Wasquatam, wasn't easy to do.

Not too long ago, a man from Manitoba Hydro came to us, wanted to talk about building a new dam. A lot of people don't trust him after what they did, that's for sure. Your uncle still hasn't forgiven 'em for what they did to the lake, to our people. But I have. Sometimes, grandson, you gotta give people another chance. Hydro, they want to work with us this time, make sure they don't make the same mistakes. So I took their job, you think about that. I get paid to tell Manitoba Hydro how bad they screwed up 40 years ago. The job was nice. But it wont bring back the fish.

We taught the white people a new word, from our language, *ethinesewin*, you know that one? It means traditional knowledge – ethinesewin. And the white people they actually listened. How about that? This new dam only supposed to flood a half a square kilometre, we get a third of the profits, a new training centre, and a good chunk of the jobs. Think we got a pretty good deal. Maybe when you're older I can get you a job at Manitoba

Hydro. Oh, don't worry. Manitoba Hydro won't change me. I'll change them. I'm too old to change.

This lake, it's a legacy of all the things that were done wrong, and we can never forget. But, we must forgive. This new project, grandson, it's more like it. Maybe it will even heal some old wounds, but we gotta be careful. We gotta make sure we don't get fooled again. Anyway. Let's go see your cousins.

*Unueqal Harvest:* Buenas tardes. Greetings everyone from La Via Campesina and from my home Paraguay. Thank-you to the members of this peace and development group for not only hosting me here in your city, but also for giving me the opportunity to speak to you about my country. We called it el Corazón de American - the Heart of America. Paraguay is a small country. Land-locked in central South America. We could fit inside our largest neighbour Brazil a dozen times over. I've come to tell you that where I live the soy plantations are taking over and destroying lives.

The never-ending fields of industrial soy crops in South America pose many dangers. But it can be deadly to simply live among them. Five years ago, my 11 year old son was riding his bicycle on a road through the soy fields. He was returning home from the store when a dangerous farm machine surprised him and sprayed him, he was swallowed up in a liquid cloud of chemicals and crashed into the ditch. When he struggled home, we had to ring the poison out of his hair. We took him to the hospital where they found toxic chemicals throughout his small body.

After two weeks, he was well enough to come home. But the day after we brought him back, the machine returned as well. They came and sprayed the crops only 15 metres from our house. In Paraguay, our homes often have no glass in the window, and that day we could not protect him from the chemicals. My son died within two days. You can't imagine the feeling of helplessness, being unable to protect him and even inside our own home. My son's death led to a demonstration in the city, the police beat many of us, including my husband. But our struggle had just begun.

We took turns travelling the country, meeting other campesinos - peasant farmers - and hearing their stories while sharing ours. We learned of breathing problems, miscarriages and deformed babies, throughout the soy growing areas. Finally, the people rose up. In 2004, campesinos across the country armed themselves and occupied the soy fields to demand reform. My husband persuaded me to stay behind and he left ready to fight. We heard news that the plantation owners had paid the army and the police to crush the campesinos. I waited for my husband to come home. And it was the same for thousands. Finally, I learned he was alive but under arrest. I prayed for his safe return.

That's when the people from La Via Campesina - the peasant way - came to encourage us. They, I should say we, now, are an international movement that is over 100,000,000 strong. They explained to us what the soy industry had done to Brazil, the world's largest exporter of soy beans. They say Brazil is running out of space, and so millions of peasants have been forced from their land. Some campesinos were paid, but others were

chased away or even murdered. In Brazil today, were they used to be communities and family farms there are now endless fields of industrial soy. This is agriculture but without the farmers. They aren't even growing the soy beans for people to eat, almost all of it goes to animal feed and fuel tanks. I wonder how many people in Brazil have been poisoned like my son.

Finally, my husband was released. He was much thinner, but not badly hurt. And then they said some terrible things to him but he won't talk about it. Soon after, military bases sprung up everywhere that soy grows. All of the farmers who were arrested were told not to protest or else. But we would not be silent. My husband and I joined La Via Campesina and we encouraged the poor to vote. Many have given up on democracy, after all, Paraguay has suffered many wars and dictators over the years. But I have never given up on the belief that we could make a change by telling the truth and demanding justice.

At last we have hope. Two years ago, Fernando Lugo, the bishop of the poor defeated the corrupt Colorado Party to become president of Paraguay. Our first left-wing president in 60 years. Will our new leader bring us free from invading soy plantations and crushing poverty? I pray so. But at last, now we will see. We will see!

### **soundbite**

*JS:* This is Deconstructing Dinner, a syndicated radio show and podcast produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman. You can learn more about the show at [deconstructingdinner.ca](http://deconstructingdinner.ca).

You've been listening to the original work of Winnipeg's Geoff Hughes and his play Unequal Harvest. In August of this year, Deconstructing Dinner's Andrea Langlois was treated to a rehearsal performance of the work presented as part of the Victoria Fringe Festival. We'll listen in on another monologue in just a moment, but first, an interview with performers Kami Desilets and Brent Hirose who share the motivation behind Unequal Harvest and describe the different monologues that the work is composed of.

*Kami Desilets:* The show's called unequal harvest and we are part of PeaceMeal Theatrical Productions which is the playwright Geoff Hughes who's back in Winnipeg. Myself, Kami Desilets...

*Brent Hirose:* And I'm Brent Hirose.

*Andrea Langlois:* Great. So why did you choose to perform this play?

*Kami Desilets:* Well, it was something that Geoff and I had talked about last year. We had performed this show for the Canadian FoodGrains Bank for World Food Day and we had two performances after that and we had a lot of people that were interested in having us come out to talk to their schools and all that type of thing. And so it was kind of an idea that spurred after that that this play shouldn't be over. So, we wanted to workshop it into a two person show and take it across the fringe festivals to get the word out there.

*Brent Hirose:* Now, Geoff was originally supposed to do the role of, all the way through the festivals, and he did it for the stop in Ottawa and the stop in Winnipeg, but he ended up getting another gig that he couldn't turn down and they asked Kami and Geoff both asked me to take up his role, so that the trip didn't have to end.

Now I had been planning on going to Victoria with another show "When the Killer Mutant Lizards Attack," but was on the waitlist, and still wanted to go to another fringe festival 'cause I had been touring last year and loved it. And after reading the play and, of course, I've worked with Kami before, I was delighted to have the opportunity, so I picked that up and then my other show got let in now I'm doing both.

*Andrea Langlois:* So what's the response been - you talked a bit about schools, and other people wanting you to come in and do the play.

*Kami Desilets:* Yeah, we've had really great response across the board. When we had first started doing the show, we were doing it for...as a presentational piece. And we were doing for a lot of people who are kind of knee deep in world issues to begin with. So, this was a nice test to see if it worked for the regular 'ol person coming to a fringe festival show as well as and we've had really great response. Quite often when we talked to the audience at the end of the show most will stay behind to shake our hands and thank us.

We've been given gifts by our audience members, we have an authentic Maasai blanket that we're using for our show that we didn't have at the beginning of the show which was given to us by an audience member who had just come back from Kenya and was touched by what we were doing and so she passed that along to us as a gift to our show and...little things like that have been happening and its just, its such, it's a really gratifying show to do because people are so happy with what we're doing, so, its great to hear that.

*Brent Hirose:* Yeah, it's a very strong message. And I saw the show with Geoff playing the original part in Winnipeg to prepare for coming out here. And even after having read the show dozens and dozens of times and starting to memorize it, it still hit me and effected me emotionally, and I wasn't really ready for that being so familiar with the script, but that was once of those...well I made a good decision in doing this because there's definitively something worth hearing here.

*Andrea Langlois:* You say there's a strong message - what is that message?

*Brent Hirose:* Well, I think I take from my reading of it, is to show that we're all connected, all over the world by the politics and policies surrounding food and that it's an important thing to be aware of. Particularly as the world becomes more and more global and more and more interconnected that it's not a message that you can just eat your cornflakes in peace, you have to understand what's going on in the world and, you know, be aware of that.

*Kami Desilets:* And, Geoff, when he was originally writing the show, didn't necessarily want to include a band-aid solution within the pieces that we present. It was more focused on just making everybody aware of what's going on around them and hoping that that would affect them to make a change in their own life.

*Andrea Langlois:* So we have a few clips that we'll be able to play, but can you tell me and our listeners a little bit about the characters that we meet in this play.

*Brent Hirose:* Well, both of us play four characters. My four characters, I play a Maasai farmer, so he has abandoned his traditional way of life to start raising crops as a necessity. And he talks about the politics of being a farmer in Africa and how world powers are trying to change the way that farming works there and the dangers of that. Then a prairie farmer from the Canadian prairies who talks about how their farmers are becoming increasingly scarce in the prairies. And, how he's trying very hard to hold onto his family farm and not get swallowed up into the bigger, corporate world.

And then there is a native elder who is in Manitoba and just talks about a specific story of a lake that was destroyed in the creation of a hydro dam and then sort of shows the fall out of that. And has a hopeful end, in looking to start to change the way things are done and look at things to be done a little bit more proactively with all the parties involved.

And then finally, the last monologue is of the playwright himself, who tells his personal story of being involved in activism and in particular one farmer - Mr. Lee - who goes to great extremes to make his point about how the World Trade Organization has affected farming, particularly for the small scale peasant farmers in some parts of the world.

*Kami Desilets:* And I play four roles myself. The first one is a teacher from Wales. She is talking to a convention in Oslo, Norway where they assigned the convention on cluster munitions which actually I was just reading about in the paper the other day, how it is now passed and she talks about how cluster bombing affects the farming in her neighbourhood, in her small village, how it affected her family. And at the same time, she switches back and forth from the conference and talking to her students in Laos and kind of mirroring how she gets that information out to the children as well.

The second character that I play is an embroider from Bangladesh who has been widowed since she was 17 years old and she's doing some work at, it's a Fair Trade Centre that's sponsored by the widows friend which is from America, from the United States of America. And she talks about her life and how growing up she, living in the Delta of Bangladesh, how it's hard to grow food there because there's not a lot of land, that's where all the peasants are forced to kind of live in that area, especially widowed women because they don't have rights to land and that type of thing out there, so she talks about her life that way.

Then there is a volunteer at a food bank which could be anywhere in Canada, really. And she is doing an orientation for people who are about to volunteer at this food bank and

she tells her story about trying to feed her kids while being on welfare or living in women's shelters and stuff like that, tells her personal story and then thanks the people that she's talking to for doing what they do and volunteering at a food bank where it's really needed, one of her lines is that in food banks across the country there are more volunteers than paid employees, so she kind of talks about that as well.

And then, the final character is an activist from Paraguay who's part of La Via Campesina and she tells the story of how in Paraguay the soy industry is kind of taking over all of the farm land and she talks about a very personal story of her son being killed by the toxic chemicals of the fertilizer machines and all that stuff. And then tells her story about how her and her husband joined La Via Campesina to help to make a change.

*Unequal Harvest:* In 2008, I was hired by three non-profit groups to write and direct a play. This play. The original version of Unequal Harvest. Now the overall focus was on food but the producers had many specifics they wanted included in this script. They called me to a meeting to show me their list and asked me to be prepared to add to it. Now I had many ideas but only one story I needed to tell if I was to write this play. My experience meeting a Korean farmer named Mr. Lee in Cancun Mexico and I was ready to insist.

So, I come to this very important meeting and they show me their list and I'm shocked to see that it includes Mr. Lee, Cancun, WTO. I pointed at it, and asked: Did we talk about this at all? We had not. And naturally my employers were confused as to my reaction so I explained how I had met Mr. Lee. In fact, I had brought a letter Mr. Lee had given me to this very meeting to convince everyone that I should tell my story which, more accurately, is Mr. Lee's story.

In 2003 I went to Cancun where two very different organizations were holding meetings. Now, the World Trade Organization was holding a meeting where they were attempting to pass a sweeping trade agreement. This is something they had failed to do four years earlier at the battle of Seattle. On the other side of the coin, La Via Campesina was holding a world farmers forum where I would spend most of the week. On the final Saturday of the forum I a big march was planned to protest the WTO agenda which was largely seen as being profits before people. Thousands of people gathered in a public square to join the campesinos. Everyone was wearing green scarves in solidarity with the peasant farmers.

Now I was looking for some friends that I had made when a large group of people holding a huge shiny object caught my attentions. As I came closer I heard that they were playing musical instruments - drums, symbols, and gongs. They were Korean, I could tell because they were all wearing uniform vests with the flag stitched on it. They also all had matching hats to block out the blazing sun. As I came closer the large object was huge and so carried by four people on two poles like you might carry around royalty or something, it was like a miniature scaled down Korean building, layered with curves, but brilliant with red and gold foiled bunting flickering in the breeze. It was quite impressive. One Korean who was neither playing an instrument nor carrying the whatever it was,

approached me. He's was about my dad's age. He smiled and handed me a glossy piece of paper. I thanked him, folded it, put it in my pocket. He continued on his way, passing out this information to others who'd been attracted by the spectacle and I continued on my way, found the people I was looking for and soon the march was off.

We walked until we came to this large chain-link fence with tons of Mexican cops on the other side. Some people tried to climb the fence, but I was at the back and suddenly, I heard shouting by the fence as if someone had gotten hurt or there was an accident. Now, where I was no one knew what had happened. I mean there were thousands of us.

Late that day, a few hours after the march, we found out what had happened. Someone had gotten hurt. In fact, someone had died and it was not an accident. A Korean farmer named Mr. Lee had climbed to the top of the fence and started leading a chant in English. Before long everyone within ear shot was shouting 'WTO Kills Farmers.' Then Mr. Lee climbed down the fence, took out a knife, and killed himself.

Later that night, I was emptying out my pockets when I came across something that I had completely forgotten. A large folded, glossy piece of paper and I remembered the Koreans, their musical instruments, the object they were carrying, and, of course, the man who had given me this piece of paper. It was a letter re-printed from an article in a magazine. There was also a picture of Mr. Lee holding a sign that says: WTO Kills Farmers.

Mr. Lee was the man who had given me this piece of paper. Now he was dead. He talked about how since WTO regulations kicked in, millions of Korean farmers had been kicked out of work but cheap American rights. He said, "How would be your emotional reaction if your salary dropped suddenly to a half without knowing clearly the reason. Listen to this: once I run to a house where a farmer abandoned his life by drinking a toxic chemical because of his uncontrollable debts. I also could do nothing, but hearing the howling of his wife. If you were me, how you feel?"

Suddenly it hit me. The large object that the men were carrying, it was a ceremonial coffin. Mr. Lee's coffin. I had witnessed a Korean funeral march and had not known what I was looking at. I've held onto this letter for many years, not knowing exactly what it is I should do with it. That is until I got the chance to write Unequal Harvest. Then it was obvious. I'm certain Mr. Lee wanted you to read this.

### **soundbite**

*JS:* This is Deconstructing Dinner. That was Brent Hirose performing one of many monologues making up the original work titled Unequal Harvest written by Winnipeg's Geoff Hughes. A thanks to Deconstructing Dinner's Victoria correspondent Andrea Langlois for those performance recordings and interviews with Kami Desilets and Brent Hirose.

While the Victoria Fringe Festival where those recordings were compiled has now since passed, Unequal Harvest will be performed once again, but this time in Winnipeg on September 29<sup>th</sup> at Aqua Books, 274 Garry St. The show starts at 7:30pm and admission is \$10. Links to more information on Unequal Harvest's production company PeaceMeal Theatrical Productions will be posted on the Deconstructing Dinner website, at [deconstructingdinner.ca](http://deconstructingdinner.ca) and the September 16<sup>th</sup> episode.

### **ending theme**

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

This radio show is provided free of charge to campus/community radio stations across the country and relies on the financial support from you the listener. Support for the program can be donated through our website at [deconstructingdinner.ca](http://deconstructingdinner.ca) or by dialling 250-352-9600.