

Introduction

"Performing Canada" evokes images of theatricality and drama, of addressing an audience from onstage, "where it's so bright and so dark at the same time," to quote the novelist Ann-Marie MacDonald who is also an actress and a playwright. All these performative elements are present in our thematic dossier in this volume, where Canada is shown to be inseparable from its various cultural and historical representations. These essays offer a series of shifting scenarios on the spectacle of nation-building since the mid-nineteenth century, or alternatively the essays might be read as a dialogue onstage, "performing Canada" in different voices through various frames of inquiry and analysis. But whose voices do we hear, and what kind of performances are we watching? What is illuminated and what is left in the dark? What surprised the Editors most in the submissions for this volume was the emphasis on history rather than on the present time or on the performing arts. Indeed, there is only one thematic essay which addresses contemporary performances of a national narrative, and that too deals with a historical phenomenon. There are no thematic contributions from a francophone perspective, and though that absence is recuperated in our final review essay on recent theatre studies in Quebec, these responses to the topic raise important questions about how

Présentation

« Le Canada mis en scène » évoque des images de théâtralité et de drame, d'acteurs s'adressant au public de la scène, « là où c'est si brillant et si sombre en même temps », pour citer un mot de la romancière Ann-Marie MacDonald, qui est également comédienne et dramaturge. Tous ces éléments de la mise en scène sont représentés dans le dossier thématique du présent numéro, où le Canada apparaît comme inséparable de ses diverses représentations culturelles et historiques. Ces articles offrent toute une série de scénarios changeants sur le spectacle de la construction d'un pays qui se poursuit depuis le milieu du dix-neuvième siècle, ou encore on peut les lire comme un tout, une sorte de dialogue qui se poursuivrait sur une scène, « le Canada mis en scène », dans des voix différentes et à travers des cadres d'analyse et d'enquête différents. Mais de qui entend-on les voix et à quelle sorte de représentation assiste-t-on? Qu'est-ce qui est illuminé et qu'est-ce qui demeure dans l'ombre? Ce qui a surpris les rédacteurs de la *Revue* dans la plupart des textes qu'ils ont reçus pour ce numéro a été l'accent mis sur l'histoire plutôt que sur l'époque actuelle ou les arts du spectacle. De fait, on ne compte qu'un seul article thématique qui porte précisément sur les mises en scène contemporaines d'un récit national, et même ce texte-là traite

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Des renseignements sur l'abonnement se trouvent à la fin du présent numéro.

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*Performing Canada
Le Canada mis en scène*

Table of Contents / Table des matières

Coral Ann Howells

Introduction 5

Tamara Vukov

Performing the Immigrant Nation at Pier 21: Politics and
Counterpolitics in the Memorialization of Canadian
Immigration 17

Johanne Devlin Trew

Conflicting Visions: Don Messer, Liberal Nationalism and the
Canadian Unity Debate 41

Ryan Edwardson

Narrating a Canadian Identity: Arthur R.M. Lower's Colony to
Nation and the Nationalization of History 59

Andrea Kunard

Relationships of Photography and Text in the Colonization
of the Canadian West: The 1858 Assiniboine and Saskatchewan
Exploring Expedition 77

Robert Cupido

The Medium, the Message and the Modern: The Jubilee
Broadcast of 1927 101

Forum / Discussion en forum

Richard J.F. Day

Can There Be a Postcolonial Multiculturalism? A Response to
Ian Angus 127

Ian Angus

Abyss, or a Located Ethics? Reply to Day 133

Review Essays / Essais critiques

Daniel Salée

Enjeux et défis de l'affirmation identitaire et politique des
peuples autochtones au Canada : autour de quelques ouvrages
récents 139

Katalin Kürtösi

Books on Québec Theatre, Playwrights, and Michel Tremblay . . . 163

Authors / Auteurs. 169

Canadian Studies Journals Around the World

Revue d'études canadiennes dans le monde 171

Books on Québec Theatre, Playwrights, and Michel Tremblay

Dramaturgies québécoises des années quatre-vingt. Jean Cléo Godin et Dominique Lafon. Montréal : Leméac. 1999. 264 p.

Le théâtre québécois 1975-1995. Sous la direction de Dominique Lafon. Montréal : Fides. 2001. 527 p.

Michel Tremblay, l'enfant multiple. Marie-Lyne Piccione. Bordeaux : Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux. 1999. 197 p.

Le théâtre québécois 1975-1995 is the second volume examining theatre in the series Archives des Lettres canadiennes; the title of each volume makes it clear that by "lettres canadiennes" the research centre responsible for the series means writing in French in Canada. Volume V, *Le théâtre canadien-français*, summarized theatrical activities and plays from their origins up to 1975, while the present volume—Volume X in the series—concentrates on the two decades between 1975 and 1995. The size of the two books reflects the dimensions of theatre in their two respective periods: Volume V covered 370 years in 1,000 pages—more than two thirds of which dealt with the mid-twentieth century—while Volume X analyzes twenty years of Québec theatre in 527 pages. The two volumes are structured differently: Volume V contains papers as well as profiles of contemporary playwrights with short excerpts from their plays and a bibliography. Volume X, however, is strictly academic. Editor Dominique Lafon arranged the twenty-four papers around five areas, namely, "État des lieux," "Dramaturgie," "La mise en scène," "Scénographie et écriture scénique," and "Échanges, diffusion et réception," followed by a selected bibliography. The two volumes accomplish the mission to which they were dedicated, namely to offer an indispensable source on theatrical activities in the French language in Canada. In both volumes the contributors are outstanding experts in their respective fields—some, including John Hare, Hélène Beauchamp and Josette Féral, participated in both projects.

This brief detour was necessary to fully evaluate *Le théâtre québécois* and to put it in context. Dominique Lafon was able to concentrate on topics strictly connected to the theatre because by the end of the 1990s there were other books dedicated to playwrights and plays. This decision is in line with

the latest tendencies in theatre studies: emphasis is put on dramaturgical and semiotic aspects, production and reception, and aspects of the performance text, while the analysis of the play-text is left to literary critics. The two decades under scrutiny mark a significant change in the role and place of theatre in Québec society; after the strong political implications of the late sixties and seventies, the second part of the period examined in Lafon's volume is more concerned with aesthetic aspects. After 1980, to borrow Jean Cléo Godin's term, a "richesse intellectuelle" (57) replaced the conservative, anti-intellectual, nationalist approaches. The new dramaturgies of the last two decades of the twentieth century appeared after the 1980 referendum and underline,

une rupture avec le théâtre essentiellement socio-politique de la décennie précédente. Elles [...] privilégient l'onirique, l'hétérogénéité, l'éclatement formel et autoréférentialité. [...] une bonne partie de la production théâtrale de cette période se caractérise par l'emploi de la métafiction.

La métafiction signale un théâtre en introspection, qui conjugue la création d'un univers fictif et son commentaire voire sa déconstruction. (Shawn Huffman, 73)

The most frequent strategies for these purposes are intertextuality, *métissage*, and theatre within the play: the majority of important playwrights of the period, for example Michel Marc Bouchard, Normand Chaurette, René-Daniel Dubois, Dominic Champagne, and Michel Tremblay in *Le Vrai Monde?*, use them abundantly.

Dominique Lafon's own paper looks at plays from a thematic point of view, specifically the family, as shown in the work of Tremblay, Marie Laberge, Pol Pelletier, Jeanne-Mance Delisle, Michel Marc Bouchard, Jean-Pierre Ronfard and others. The family has been of central importance in the dramatic genre since the late nineteenth century, when Ibsen and then Strindberg analyzed the male and female roles in this small unit of society; dramatic conflict was the result of basic differences between husband and wife, parents and children. In the second half of the twentieth century, North American plays seldom show a complete family on stage, and Québec drama is no exception: fathers are mainly absent, mothers dominate or become tyrannical, and frequent incestuous and homosexual relationships prove that in these plays we witness a "renversement de valeurs familiales, leitmotiv du théâtre des années 80." (108) The first three papers of the "Dramaturgie" chapter, namely "Création et réflexion: le retour du texte et de l'auteur" by Jean-Cléo Godin¹, "Les nouvelles écritures théâtrales: l'intertextualité, le métissage et la mise en pièces de la fiction" by Shawn Huffman, and "Un air de famille" by Dominique Lafon address the same topic. Even though the papers adopt different perspectives, they often (unavoidably) overlap and refer to the same works in their analyses. This overlapping occurs in the remainder of the volume as well; the work of Jean-Pierre Ronfard, Gilles Maheu and Robert Lepage are examined from

the point of view of collective creation (by Jean-Marc Larrue), as subjects of individual chapters (by Paul Lefebvre, Louise Vigeant, Irène Perelli-Contos and Chantal Hébert), or as outstanding directors of the period (by Josette Féral). As previously mentioned, it is unavoidable that a collection of twenty-four papers about the same topic will deal with the same works and the same artists more than once. One shortcoming of this volume (as well as the other two works under review) is the lack of a reference index at the end.

Theatre addressing and representation of particular segments of the audience (young people, women, the English minority of Montréal) is introduced and analyzed in separate papers. Claire Dé writes about costume in Montreal theatres, and Marie-Christine Lesage examines the relationship between theatre and the other arts. Two papers are dedicated to theatrical activities in Québec City, provincial towns, and franco-Ontarian theatre; Madeleine Greffard writes about Québec acting companies and the international theatre scene; and Diane Pavlovic researches foreign productions and translations of Québec plays. Alvina Ruprecht's enquiry into the role of festivals in theatre life not only provides a basic foundation for this generally neglected aspect of the genre, but emphasizes that festivals lead us back to the origins of theatre. At the same time, they point to the future, as many young artists first appear for large audiences as part of festival programmes. In Ruprecht's paper, the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques is given exhaustive attention; the FTA, particularly in its first decade, introduced the most remarkable performances, not only from North America, but from Europe and Asia as well, to Montréal audiences, in conjunction with a showcase of Québec and English Canadian plays. Her critical remarks in the conclusion, however, are worthy of consideration:

[...] ces festivals ne reflètent plus les complexités de la dynamique culturelle actuelle. Ils évoluent comme si le Québec était toujours culturellement homogène, autonome et immuable, non pas multiculturel, migrant, pris entre l'Europe, les Amériques et tous les continents [...] le festival ne serait-il pas le moment idéal pour réfléchir sur les discours culturels internes, les rapports avec l'autre parmi nous, où se rencontrent les cultures hôtes et les cultures transplantées? (440)

The latest festival, which was held after the period examined by the present volume (2001) moved in this direction: parallel with the FTA, a festival of smaller scale was dedicated to First Nations plays and theatres with some exciting shows. *Le théâtre québécois*, however, does not open in this direction; the papers do not look at Aboriginal or immigrant theatre, although from the mid-1980s to the present, they have played an important role in the theatre scene of Montréal. Another research area of modern theatre studies neglected by this volume is the study of audience: who are the patrons of Le Théâtre du nouveau monde (TNM), the FTA events, Le Théâtre de la Manufacture, or of Le Théâtre du Nouvel Ontario? The theatre

of Québec made many gains during this twenty-year period and these questions may have been worth asking.

Dramaturgies québécoises concentrates on the 1980s—a period which was covered in *Le théâtre québécois*, as well—offering one chapter about outstanding performances and *metteurs en scène* and four chapters about individual playwrights (Michel Marc Bouchard, Normand Chaurette, René-Daniel Dubois and Marie Laberge). The “Introduction” section outlines the general tendencies of the age, highlighting the move from politically connected theatre towards a more aesthetically conscious concept of the art, with a strong poetic presence both in the texts themselves and in the visual qualities of the shows. In “Du texte emprunté au texte scénique,” Jean Cléo Godin stresses the influence of German writers and directors on the theatre of Québec in the 1980s with its definite theatricality, “combinant la précision méticuleuse du jeu et la profusion décadente véhiculée par la tradition du cabaret berlinois” (27). Another important aspect of Québec theatre was the impact of Shakespeare, both on palimpsests of plays and in staging plays by Robert Lepage, Alice Ronfard and others. The plays and performances of this decade share one common theme—self-reflection at the expense of theatrical illusion. With regard to these elements, both J. C. Godin and Dominique Lafon speak about a new dramaturgy as most typical of the second-last decade of the twentieth century (and they both stress that this approach continues well into the 1990s). This change in focus indicates that the theatre of Québec had come of age by the 1980s. Its innate evolution was accompanied by a sensitive reaction to new tendencies of world theatre, and therefore theatre artists from Québec could actively participate in this process and contribute to the new understanding of theatre as an art form.

The chapters analyzing individual playwrights in *Dramaturgies québécoises* are not only well researched but place Bouchard, Chaurette, Dubois and Laberge in the context of both Québec drama and theatre of the time, and the international theatre scene. The chronology at the end of the volume mentions the most remarkable historical and cultural events of each given year in Canada and Québec, the performances that took place, as well as the publication of play-texts and essays about the theatre. Because of their dedication and accuracy, the authors’ works should be recommended to future contributors on this topic.

Marie-Lyne Piccione’s book is different from the previous two volumes in several respects: it is a monograph about one author, Michel Tremblay, whose writing reaches beyond the realm of drama and theatre, and Piccione examines this remarkable oeuvre in its totality. The five chapters are arranged around topics and problematics, such as “Menteur-usurpateur,” “La toile et le tricot,” “Quand l’autre est le même,” “Palinodies et palimpsestes,” and finally “Les voies de la création.” The short conclusion is followed by appendices containing the summary of Tremblay’s major works, an exhaustive list of his characters in alphabetical order and the

works in which they are featured, a "family tree," a bibliography, essential biographical data and an interview with Tremblay himself. It might be of interest to quickly look back at Renate Usmiani's monograph of 1982 about Michel Tremblay, which treated him principally and almost exclusively as a playwright; seventeen years later his work demonstrates completely different proportions. (Piccione does not mention Usmiani's book in her bibliography.)

Piccione points at key elements, returning motifs and metaphors of Tremblay's universe with exceptional sensibility, her phrasing often displaying poetic dimensions. She can convince us that Tremblay is much more than the author of *Les Belles-Sœurs*; in her view this popular—but not populist—novelist, playwright and "autobiographe" surpasses *clichés*. With his "système d'échos, de mises en abymes et de scènes spéculaires" (21) he introduces his readers to a Daedalian labyrinth, however one does not get lost in it. She goes beyond the superficial evaluations of Tremblay's work, which claim it is easy to understand; although the heroines of his best-known plays tend to be against high culture, Tremblay himself frequently uses literary allusions and artistic references "au point d'imprimer parfois à ses ouvrages des allures encyclopédiques" (22).

Piccione follows the relationship of Tremblay's heroes with their bodies, their sexual lives, as well as the institution of the church. The framework of his stories—be they novels, or plays—is the family, but "la famille traditionnelle se meurt, entrant dans l'ère de son apocalypse" (51). The crisis of this institution was also the focus of attention in the two volumes of papers about Québec theatre and drama previously alluded to. Piccione emphasizes that this phenomenon is not restricted to one genre of contemporary Québec writing. The third chapter, casting light on the problematics of the "other" and the "same," situates this typically post-modern feature in the context of the Québec-Canada relationship:

Miroir du miroir, le texte fait de la reduplication une modalité essentielle de son appréhension du monde : du travesti au schizophrène, les héros y sont à la fois double et scindés, pris dans le tourbillon d'une dynamique conflictuelle qui reflète, en l'exacerbant, la dialectique indéfiniment recommencée d'un pays voué à une structurelle binarité. (69)

The mirror can serve several goals: as a stage prop, it draws attention to theatricality in the play, in novels it may act as a tool for self-admiration, self-hatred or self-correction. In the mirror, objects are doubled—theatre is perhaps the most spectacular vehicle for this duplication and *Le Vrai Monde?* directs our attention to this eternal question of the art. In Tremblay's latest works the writer's interest in complex theoretical questions goes hand in hand with his attraction to ludic solutions, inviting the reader-audience into an intellectual game. Piccione's book convinces us that Tremblay is not only an "enfant multiple" but also a leading writer of the previous decades, with forthcoming works "in reserve."

Each of the above volumes accomplishes its goal—to supply the reader with reliable systematization, invaluable data about plays, playwrights, and the theatre, or provide information about Québec's best-known author internationally. Because of their wealth of information, I would strongly recommend these three volumes not only to experts of Québec theatre and literature but also to all who are interested in this particular area of North American culture.

Notes

1. In this volume both the table of contents and the title of the paper itself puts his name with a hyphen, while the title page of *Dramaturgies québécoises* has his name correctly, i.e. without a hyphen.

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