

Theatre Toronto Live, 1999: A Subjective Analysis of Theatre Life in Toronto¹

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Major theatres in London, Paris, Berlin, New York or those in Moscow, Prague, Cracow and Budapest are more or less well-known cultural institutions for people all over Europe. But can anyone not engaged in Canadian Studies name some important theatres or companies in Toronto or Montreal? Shakespeare scholars may be aware of the nearly four-decade-old Stratford Festival in Ontario and students of G. B. Shaw may know that a Shaw Festival has been operating successfully on the Niagara-on-the-Lake since 1962. But how much is known in Europe about such influential English-Canadian theatres as Theatre Passe Muraille, Tarragon, Factory, Buddies in Bad Times or the Canadian Stage Company? In his introduction to *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions*, published in 1985, the editor Anton Wagner wrote the following:

Enriched by multi-disciplinary experimentation, high artistic standards, coproductions, and increasing contact between various disciplines, the performing arts in Canada have reached a cultural critical momentum which augurs a new phase in Canada's artistic history. Canada is poised on a phase of "cultural take-off" in which regional artistic reflection and expression has attained national and international standards of significance. (19)

In a short review on my first visit to Toronto in 1987 when I saw nearly ten Canadian productions in various theatres, I also came to the conclusion that "Canadian theatre and drama have come of age and it is high time for the world to share this new Canadian experience" (5). And when in 1999 I had a chance, for the third time, to stay three months in the same city, I attended as many performances as possible to see whether Wagner's quoted statement and my conclusion were still valid after more than a decade. What I would like to do here, then, is to examine some of the major characteristics of the Toronto theatre scene.

Before doing so, however, it seems necessary to say a few words about the relevance of the case of Toronto in terms of Canadian theatre. The first point to be made here is that while Toronto has one or two venues and companies devoted to French drama and, to a lesser extent, to minority language productions such as Italian or Ukrainian, it is basically the centre of *English-language theatre*. Therefore, any pattern, trend or conclusion mentioned in this paper must be understood as a characteristic feature of *English-Canadian culture*, with no reference to or comparison with French-Canadian theatre which has had a radically different history and course of

evolution. Nevertheless, within the framework of English-Canadian professional theatre Toronto has attained a similar function to what New York has in the USA or London in Britain, i.e. while there are successful and influential regional theatres in other cities such as Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon or St. John's in Newfoundland, during the past three decades Toronto has exerted the greatest impact on the artistic standards and range of experimentation in English-Canada. Regarding its size and population (3,5 million), its central role in the Canadian economy and its geographical location within the most densely populated province of Ontario, accommodating one-third of the total population of Canada, this should not be surprising. The present situation, however, is the result of the enormous political and artistic influence of the alternative theatre movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is the period when such—still existing—professionally successful companies as Theatre Passe Muraille, Factory Theatre Lab and Tarragon Theatre were established to radically change the theatre scene in English-Canada.

Today Toronto has more than 100 theatre companies including large ensembles and semi-amateur groups, opera, musical, dance and puppet theatres, children's theatres and university studios besides traditional theatre institutions. Most of them rent spaces for their productions and only a smaller number has a permanent theatre building. Therefore, when talking about the theatre scene in Toronto, it is necessary to refer to what may be called the "sociological" aspect of theatre life.

Different Theatres for Different Audiences(?)

Although in its almost complete theatre listings and reviews the editors of the free weekly cultural magazine called *NOW* do not distinguish between commercial, experimental, alternative, amateur or university productions, it is quite evident that they may be divided into several groups on the basis of their target audience, artistic endeavours and long-term cultural or commercial interest. For the purposes of this presentation I have distinguished the following dominant types of theatre: commercial, mainstream, alternative, fringe and educational. The five groups have been set up primarily on the basis of their major role or function within the society at large. Therefore, the distinguishing features of the various categories include such characteristics as the composition and size of the audience as well as the nature of the repertory, and they do not refer to any aesthetic or artistic criteria.

Commercial and Mainstream

Commercial theatre in Toronto is as lively and entertainment-centered as its counterpart on New York's Broadway or London's West End. The three largest theatre venues—the Royal Alexandra, the Princess of Wales and Winter Garden Theatres—offer their audiences such international hits as Lionel Bart's *Oliver!*, Yasmina Reza's *ART* or Disney's *The Lion King*, most of which were brought to Toronto by David and Ed Mirvish, the richest and most influential producers in Canada. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Ed Mirvish has become rich as the owner of the famous Honest Ed's superstore, which offers all sorts of mass quality products at relatively low prices to the lower layers of society. Tickets for Mirvish productions may range from 20 to 120 Canadian dollars. Consequently, the audience is made up of the social, political and economic elite, the snobs and a segment of the theatre

profession. From a professional point of view most of these performances are of an international standard, and they involve very well-trained and talented actors and actresses. For example, the child actor for the title role of *Oliver!* was selected from several thousand applicants in an audition running for weeks. As for the media, almost all national dailies, television channels and radio stations advertise these productions in such a way as to instil a feeling of guilt in those who have not seen them.

The next group of theatres in Toronto, which I have called mainstream, is best represented by the Canadian Stage Company, established in 1988 as a merger of the Toronto Free Theatre, one of the significant alternative theatres of the seventies, and CentreStage, originally operating according to the principles of the so-called regional theatre centres of the early sixties. The merging of these two theatres resulted in one of the most important and largest "mainstream" arts organisations in Canada, producing more than 300 performances of contemporary Canadian and international works at four venues including the St. Lawrence Centre for the Performing Arts accommodating the Bluma Appel Theatre with its 900 seats. Besides "initiat[ing] and support[ing] the creation and development of new plays by established playwrights and rising young talents," the Canadian Stage Company "provides weekly discussion groups for audience members and artists to talk about a play following a performance" and "offers an extensive education program with participatory workshops for approximately 1,000 secondary school students each year" (Canadian Stage *The Making* n.p.). As far as the audience attending the Canadian Stage productions is concerned, it may be characterised by a mixture of the well-to-do and upper-middle class people as well as intellectuals, university students and theatre professionals. Tickets for the performances range between 20 and 80 dollars, depending on the venue.

The repertory of the 1999/2000 season included six Canadian stage works, one Irish and one British play. The greatest hit of the first half of the season was *Street of Blood*, an amazing mixture of two-hour puppetry and one-man show without intermission created and performed by the Albertan puppeteer and theatrical magician Ronnie Burkett. One of the most provocative and internationally recognised Canadian artists, Burkett worked with 36 marionettes moving like real people and gave his voice to more than half a dozen characters presented at various ages of their life in a story about the clichés of Hollywood, prairie life and growing up gay in a small community. The professional level and the cleverly combined theatrical effects of the comic and the tragic provoked a 10-minute standing ovation from the all-adult audience. The show ran for more than a month with a full house every night.

The other Canadian plays include the world première of *Heaven* by George F. Walker, English-Canada's best-known contemporary playwright; *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again*, a play by Michel Tremblay, the most famous dramatist in French-Canadian theatre; *The Overcoat* by Morris Panych whose *7Stories* had its European premiere in Debrecen in 1996; *Patience*, the remount of the best new drama of the 1997/98 season, by Jason Sherman, one of the most sophisticated Jewish playwrights in Canada; and an evening of music by Leslie Arden.

The Irish play which opened the season was the Canadian premiere of Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the winner of four Tony Awards and a Broadway hit in 1998 directed by Garry Hynes, Artistic Director of the Druid The-

atre in Galway, Ireland. Martin McDonagh has been called by one of the play's reviewers a contemporary Synge who knows Irish peasant life and the Irish psyche as well as his classic forefather, which was a real challenge for the all-Canadian cast. The language of the play, as Hynes put it, is "very Irish" and while the crude naturalistic setting and acting style worked pretty well on the stage, some of the actors had a hard time in convincing the audience of their Irishness. Although Alan Ayckbourn's *Communicating Doors* was advertised as "a comedy turned into a Hitchcockian thriller about time travel," (Canadian Stage, 1999/2000 7) the most memorable aspect of the production was the sexy outfit of the main character, a dominatrix prostitute caught up in a hilarious murder plot and played by a young and certainly talented actress.

When using the term "mainstream," I actually refer to the fact that theatres belonging to this category are traditional theatre institutions in a European sense. By this I mean that the buildings themselves have been originally planned and built to accommodate regular theatre performances, in most cases with a permanent company, and, as a result, they have been *accepted and recognised as such* institutions both by the authorities and those theatre-goers who consider this pastime as part of their social life. In very simple terms, I may say that the general population would identify these institutions with the notion of theatre. The term "mainstream theatre," on the other hand, also implies that the repertory is usually designed to correspond to the general taste and expectations of the potential audience, with no shocking or dubious experimentation. This is one of the reasons why these theatres are not willing to take risks and offer new plays by young playwrights which have not been tested previously elsewhere. The positive side of all this is that besides presenting classical European and American works, mainstream theatres frequently remount earlier successful or interesting Canadian productions whereby they partly function as a kind of national theatre, preserving and refreshing at least some of the indigenous works of their culture.

The Alternat(iv)e Theatre Scene

In reference to this term, in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* Alan Filewood claims that "it is necessary to distinguish between alternate theatre as a phase of post-colonial consolidation in the arts... linked to international currents of theatrical innovation in the 1960s and 1970s, and a continuing tradition of experimental and popular theatre—sometimes called 'alternative theatre'—that defines itself by its opposition to mainstream theatre" (*Oxford* 16). However attractive this distinction may seem to be, the situation when observed more closely is more complex. Filewood himself mentions at the same place that "by the mid-1970s the distinction between alternate and mainstream theatre had begun to blur, taking on a financial rather than an ideological definition" (18). While such a distinction is certainly valid on a very general level, it must be further refined to describe the current situation. In order to make this point more clear a very brief historical overview is necessary here.

The Canadian alternate theatre movement effectively started in 1959 with the foundation of Toronto Workshop Productions and became influential with the emergence of such new artistic ventures as Theatre Passe Muraille in 1968, Factory Theatre Lab in 1970 and Tarragon Theatre in 1971. The most important features of what has been regarded as alternat(iv)e include a new approach to performance, a

conscious and provocative opposition to contemporary mainstream theatre, the support and encouragement of indigenous Canadian drama and acting style, and the emergence of new dramatic genres, all of which were most clearly manifested in a particularly successful and influential type of Canadian performance: collective creation. The movement soon spread all over Canada, giving birth to a new generation of playwrights and theatre artists and generating the first flourishing period of indigenous Canadian drama. Dramatists George F. Walker, John Murrell, Carol Bolt, Sharon Pollock, David French, Rick Salutin, Alan Stratton, Judith Thompson as well as directors George Luscombe, Bill Glasco, Paul Thompson, Martin Kinch and a host of other artists made their name in the world of the theatre and contributed to the first international recognition of English-Canadian drama.

What is perhaps most striking in this movement is that all the three major alternate theatres—TPM, Factory and Tarragon—are still alive today and more popular than ever. They grew into the eighties and nineties with their audiences slightly but not radically changed. In other words: the then young and both politically and artistically anti-establishment theatre-goers who supported the rise of the movement have remained faithful to these institutions. Despite the fact that during the past three decades most of these people have become part of today's Canadian establishment and leading intellectuals, it would be an exaggeration to consider these theatres as mainstream. Some of the radicalism and daring experimentation characteristic of the early seventies is certainly gone. Collective creation is no longer a fashion but these theatres are still open to new developments and young talents, they are willing to take risks by offering space and opportunity to a number of fringe events and experimental productions and, what is more important, they still believe in their mission to promote and support the continuous development of Canadian drama. Let me quote here Theatre Passe Muraille's present Artistic Director Layne Coleman's words, revealing what he thinks of the responsibility of the theatre:

Passe Muraille is a theatre driven by a need to engage its audiences. Over the past quarter of a century, the artists and audiences at Passe Muraille have forged a dream of a strong, vibrant Canadian theatre and of a highly skilled, inventive and passionate theatre community. It is a dream come true and a dream worth preserving. (Theatre Passe Muraille, "A Short History")

Before taking a look at the repertory of the three major theatres belonging to the third category, let me add yet another aspect taken from my very personal experience which has further convinced me that Passe Muraille, the Tarragon or Factory Theatre certainly fall out of the mainstream.

Late September I went to see John Mighton's *A Short History of Night* at the Tarragon, which was the first show I attended during my stay in Toronto. Like the other two alternative theatres, Tarragon is located somewhat farther from the downtown area close to a railway bridge and among really rundown factory buildings. I had a ticket for the matinee performance which ended at around four in the afternoon. Deep in thought I left the theatre and was walking towards Bathurst Street, the closest main street. I had hardly passed two blocks when a man of my age, dressed rather poorly but not like a homeless person or beggar, stopped me. "What's

that crowd over there?" he asked, pointing towards the corner of the Tarragon. "Is anything happening there?" And before I could answer him, he exclaimed with suddenly bright eyes: "Is it a Bingo hall?" "No," I said, "it is a theatre. The Tarragon." "Oh, is that so?" he said and walked away very sadly. It may appear to be an amusing anecdote but it is true word for word. And the reason why I find this story important is that even later when I talked to Canadians not particularly interested in or familiar with the theatres in Toronto, I came across the same ignorance concerning the alternative theatres, even though most of them could easily tell me where the Royal Alexandra Theatre or the Princess of Wales Theatre could be found. No wonder: these commercial theatres are located in the very heart of the city next to the Eaton Centre, the most famous shopping venue in the metropolis.

I had a very similar experience with Solar Stage, one of the best dinner theatres and situated in the banking centre on King Street on the underground level. Nobody in the huge banking and shopping complex could tell me if there was such a thing as the Solar Stage. Not even the security people who are supposed to know and guard the whole building. I missed that show and the only way I could see G. B. Shaw's *A Man of Destiny*, the same theatre's professionally marvellous production, a week later was by asking for concrete directions by phone. I do not think such an institution can be regarded as belonging to the mainstream. As far as the tickets are concerned performances in these theatres can be seen at a price between 10 and 35 dollars but all the matinees are pay-what-you-can and there are quite a number of free playreadings, discussions and meetings with actors, directors, and other theatre professionals.

The "Established Alternatives"

It can be no accident that one of the greatest hits of the season at Passe Muraille, Michael Healey's *The Drawer Boy*, a remount from the previous season, won the most prestigious literary award for the best play in Canada, the Governor-General's Award. Michael Ondaatje wrote the following about Healey's work:

The Drawer Boy is a beautifully written play. It moves from toughness and hilarity to something devastating and tender. By taking off from an earlier Passe Muraille drama, *The Farm Show*, and seeing that theatrical event from a new angle, it is one of the few plays to create an authentic tradition in our culture. (Theatre Passe Muraille, "Theatre Beyond Walls" n.p.)

The Farm Show was one of the most successful collective creations of Paul Thompson and Passe Muraille, and *The Drawer Boy* goes back to the period when the actors creating the show went to live with real farmers to have first-hand experience. The director of Healey's play, Miles Potter was one of the actors in *The Farm Show* and in *The Drawer Boy* a young actor called Miles gets involved in the life of two farmers and their friends, one of whom has lost his memory during the war and, unconsciously, perpetrated a deed that ruined the two friends' marriages and hope for a better life. By using the magic of theatre and being honest about everything, Miles can help change their life and bring back Morgan's memory with all the sadness and happiness that the two friends had gone through. It is a beautiful play turned into a wonderful production.

The repertory of Passe Muraille included, among others, 5 world premieres: 2 one-man shows—one of them starring Linda Griffiths, perhaps the best-known female solo performer in English-Canada who takes on the role of the self-destructive and mysterious poet Gwendolyn MacEwen (*Alien Creature*)—, a collective creation entitled *The Rediscovery of Sex* directed by Paul Thompson, and *The Yoko Ono Project*, a mixture of music, performance and multi-media challenging perceptions about the famous artist.

Factory Theatre offered a similar number of new plays written or created mostly by young artists, although the greatest success of the first half of the season was a remount of Wendy Lill's *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum*. Originally a novel by Sheldon Currie, then a film (Margaret's Museum) and finally a stage play, it is a folkloric tale from the Cape Breton mines revealing the life, love and tragedy of a simple family of Scottish origin who learn to overcome their tragic fate by sticking to their roots and traditions. The story was unsentimentally moving and humane and the professional level of the production was absolutely remarkable. No wonder that the play had to be extended over for two weeks after the scheduled end of its run. In contrast, the first show of the season at Factory, John Mighton's *A Short History of Night*, a play based on the lives of Johannes Kepler and Tycho Brahe, the great 16-century astronomer, is an overwritten and at times boring play turned into a slow-moving and uneven performance.

The eight productions offered by Tarragon Theatre included the works of such outstanding authors as Judith Thompson who had written a new play, *Perfect Pie*, and translated the Quebecois Serge Boucher's *Motel Helene*; the above-mentioned Michael Healey who wrote and performed *The Road to Hell*, presenting two hilarious one-act comedies (one about the love story of a lesbian golf champion and a male sports reporter, and the other about another couple who are caught between real love and post-hypnotic suggestion) with the celebrated Canadian actress Kate Lynch; Margaret Atwood, though not as a playwright but as the author of *Good Bones* and *Murder in the Dark* which provided the 18 stories selected and performed by Clare Coulter, a prominent Canadian actress and daughter of John Coulter, one of the forefathers of modern Canadian drama. The one-woman show was a remount on popular demand. Goethe's *Faust* was adapted and directed by Daniel Brooks, a highly popular young actor, playwright and director but his original works are more exciting and more challenging than this long and slow-moving show.

The Lesser-known Alternatives and University Theatres

The variety of fringe theatres is so wide that it would be hard to give a brief and general overview of them all. Considering their very hectic life and difficult financial background, one would need perhaps at least a year to obtain a realistic picture of their impact and artistic achievement. Based on my very limited experience and a few discussions I have had with people more knowledgeable, I can however mention one or two examples which may give you an idea of at least a segment of fringe theatre in Toronto.

I had the opportunity to see two one-man shows offered by a relatively new cultural organisation called Artword Theatre which started its operation in 1993 in a tiny studio space on the second floor of a warehouse in downtown Toronto. In 1998 the owners of the theatre—Ronald Weihs, a theatre artist and Judith Sandiford, a painter, both originally from Vancouver—bought a new space in Portland Street and

created a magnificent venue with a theatre auditorium seating 150 people and an art gallery, which serves as the lobby of the theatre during performances. As it is put in their mission statement, Artword Theatre "offers theatrical productions, visual art and multi-disciplinary performances combining the traditional, contemporary and experimental" (Artword Theatre, n.p.). They do not have their own company but rather provide an opportunity for artistic endeavours of various kinds which they find worth supporting. During the past few years they have presented more than 100 events, involving 250 performers and artists, including 10 original Canadian plays and musicals, 57 concerts, dance events, poetry readings and 3 opera projects. The names of the artists and the titles of the productions are usually completely unknown and most of them are never heard of again. But all of them get a chance to present their work in front of an audience which is very small though enthusiastic and encouraging. (Each of the two shows I attended had an audience of less than 20 people!) Some of the playwrights or actors remain amateur all their life and some of them use Artword Theatre as a potential stepping stone for a hopefully successful career. Some of the shows lack quality (such as *Sonofadrum* written and performed by Bill Usher, a one-time popular hippie musician who relates his life story in a rather long and unselective narrative interspersed with music) and some of them are very promising (such as *Cu'Fu*, a rerun of a one-man show by Calogero (Charly) Charelli about growing up as a Sicilian in Hamilton, Ontario). Another fringe production I saw was *Fforward* a new play written by Sue Balint, a young woman of Hungarian origin and presented by the Theatrefront Company. The play, which explored the manipulative effect of video-clips and television shows at large, was performed by very young actors and actresses to an audience of seven. Although both the written work and the staged production needed some more work, I am convinced that we will hear more about Sue Balint in the near future because she is a very talented writer.

The final category I would like to mention is educational theatre by which I mean the work of the theatre departments of universities. Both York University and the University of Toronto have a very strong programme in theatre and they emphasize playwrighting, play development and all aspects of theatre business. In the fall semester York students presented the American Eric Bogosian's controversial off-Broadway *Suburbia* with great success. The major show of the U of T students was *Princess T.*, a re-writing of the Turandot story by Daniela Fisherová, a Czech writer, mixing Oriental theatre style with commedia dell' arte elements. Though the performance was quite interesting, the eclectic scenery and acting left the audience puzzled. As far as the audiences of these university productions are concerned, I was amazed to see that they played to full houses. And these productions are regularly advertised and reviewed in most of the national dailies and especially in *NOW* magazine.

By its very nature, a conference paper cannot offer much more than a brief and sketchy summary pointing out the most essential features of the phenomenon examined. Nevertheless, the few examples taken from a wide range of the theatre scene in Toronto in one particular season must clearly indicate that the theatrical capital of English-Canada is as lively as any European city. If the information concerning the richness and diversity of English-Canadian theatre is limited on this side of the Atlantic, it is not because it is poor or lagging behind an imaginary international standard but simply because it is a relatively new phenomenon which most

Europeans have not discovered yet. Further research and scholarly activity in this field, however, may contribute to a new stage of the recognition and acknowledgement of the English-Canadian talent and artistic achievements.

Note

¹ This paper was delivered as a sub-plenary lecture at the Inaugural Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of Drama in English (HUSSDE) in January 2000 in Debrecen.

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