

## Identity Across Genres, Across Communities: Two Musical-Theatre Adaptations and the Performance of English and Acadian History in New Brunswick

Glen Nichols

### Abstract

The musical productions of *Pélagie* (2008), based on the novel *Pélagie-la-charrette* by Antonine Maillet, at the Pays de la Sagouine theme park in Bouctouche, and of *The Heart that Knows* (also 2008), based on the Charles G.D. Roberts's novel of the same name, at Live Bait Theatre in Sackville, offered two very different perspectives on the performance of identity and history in New Brunswick. Both shows were melodramatic and sentimental, and both shows performed aspects of community history and identity. However, the Acadian spectacle offered a relatively simplified but extravagant heroic originary story of a nation, while the Live Bait performance treated audiences to a more intimate production that offered a nuanced retelling of a nostalgic sense of a community and a region.

## L'identité selon les cultures et les communautés : deux adaptations de comédies musicales et l'interprétation de l'histoire anglaise et acadienne au Nouveau-Brunswick

### Résumé

La comédie musicale *Pélagie* (2008), d'après le roman *Pélagie-la-charrette* d'Antonine Maillet, présentée au parc thématique du Pays de la Sagouine, à Bouctouche, et celle de *The Heart that Knows* (aussi présentée en 2008), pièce qui reprend le titre du roman de Charles G.D. Roberts, présentée au Live Bait Theatre, à Sackville, ont débouché sur deux perspectives bien différentes en ce qui concerne la manifestation de l'identité et de l'histoire au Nouveau-Brunswick. Les deux pièces étaient mélodramatiques et sentimentales et toutes deux revêtaient des aspects de l'histoire de la collectivité et de l'identité. Alors que le spectacle acadien présentait l'histoire d'une nation héroïque et originale à la fois relativement simplifiée et extravagante, la pièce représentée au Live Bait Theatre était plus intime et racontait, avec plusieurs nuances, l'histoire nostalgique d'une communauté et d'une région.

In the summer of 2008, in Sackville and Bouctouche, New Brunswick—less than 50 miles apart geographically, but worlds apart in other ways—musical-theatre adaptations of two important New Brunswick historical novels entertained local and tourist audiences. The vastly different productions of *Pélagie*, based on the novel *Pélagie-la-charrette* by Antonine Maillet, at the Pays de la Sagouine theme park in Bouctouche, and of *The Heart that Knows*, based on the Charles G.D. Roberts's novel of the same name, at Live Bait Theatre in Sackville, offered two very different perspectives on the performance of identity and history in the province. Both shows were commercial productions designed to attract the tourist trade and boost local ticket sales, both shows were melodramatic and sentimental, and both shows performed aspects of community history and identity, referencing local landmarks and exploiting nostalgic markers. However, these adaptations offered these qualities in very different ways, with the Acadian spectacle offering a relatively simplified but extravagant heroic and originary story of a people, a nation. In contrast, Live Bait treated

audiences to a simpler, more intimate production that offered a nuanced retelling of a nostalgic sense of a community, a region.

Because of the historical focus of both literary source texts, the timely concurrence of these adaptations, and the marked contrast in adaptation strategies, these two productions provide a unique comparative case study, a window into the ways the respective communities view the performance of their identities and histories, at least as far as these texts were read by these two theatre companies. There have been some limited comparative studies of poetry (see Cogswell and Elder) and fiction (Lord on Maillet and David Adams Richards), and the groundbreaking 1985 *Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick* attempted to consider English and French literature in New Brunswick side-by-side (a step in the direction of a systemic comparison). But for the theatre in the province, there have only been isolated comparisons and specific historical surveys within aspects of each system (see for example Lonergan and Théâtre l'Escaouette; Mullaly; Nichols; Smith).

It may be useful at this point to outline how the word “performance” is used in two different ways in this essay. There is first the sense of stage “performances” or shows, the theatrical activity for the entertainment of a watching audience. Second, there is “performance” in the sense of the “performativity” of language and art, the way cultural activities, including literary and historical writing, participate in the “performance” or construction of the cultures of which they are a part. Jonathan Culler differentiates between constative and performative utterances of language, the latter of which “do not describe but perform the action they designate...., alerting us to the extent to which language performs actions rather than merely reporting them” (95). Literary theorists have “embraced the notion of the performative as one that helps to characterize literary discourse,” the idea that “literature...takes its place among the acts of language that transform the world, bringing into being things that they name” (Culler 96). Because theatre is more than merely a textual art, involving any number of visual and aural systems of communication working in concert, Ric Knowles extends the performative implications beyond the linguistic or textual to the analysis of entire production and reception factors, insisting that “‘meaning’ in a given performance situation—the social and cultural work done by a performance, its performativity, and its force—is the effect of all of these systems...working dynamically and relationally together” (Knowles 19).

Historical and literary writing as cultural and narrative activities are clearly performative in the sense Culler outlines. In the two literary adaptations examined here the performativity is enacted first through the literary texts for their reading public, then through their stage adaptations for contemporary theatre audiences, these two publics having some intersection depending on the degree to which the theatre audiences come to the spectacles pre-conditioned with knowledge of the literary originals. When literary texts that overtly go about depicting the past for a particular community (as both the source novels of this study do) become themselves the subjects of new works of art in later periods, the relationship of narrative to history to a community’s sense of itself is further performed. Following Knowles, this paper will attempt to survey the broader production elements of these two stage adaptations for what they reveal about the performance of identity and history in New Brunswick.

## The Novels

Maillet’s *Pélagie-la-charrette* was published in 1979 on the 375<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Acadie. The novel, featuring a multi-layered narrative structure and use of Acadian dialect, retells the story of the eighteenth-century Acadian overland return from exile, an ordinary epic<sup>1</sup> for the Acadians, who, in the 1970s, were beginning to see the economic and social results of the Robichaud revolution in New Brunswick and the growth of a strong sense of collective identity. Roberts’s *The Heart that Knows*, a rural idyll and romantic adventure novel set in the late nineteenth century and written while Roberts was staying in Cuba in 1906, was developed from a short story called “On Tantramar Dykes,” which had first appeared in his 1896 collection *Earth’s Enigmas*. The author explicitly lends much of his own childhood experience to his recreation of the historical period, which purports to be a “vivid invocation of the region” (Doyle 108) and a “a realistic portrait of Canadian life in the latter part of the nineteenth-century” (MacDonald vii). Although Roberts’s motivation may have been nostalgic and Maillet’s more polemical, both authors attempted to retell the history of a previous period important to them as individuals and to their communities. Audiences for both novels, while acknowledging their “fiction,” also look to them for a sense of their past. And both theatrical adaptations would capitalize on this connection to history and community, though each in different ways.

The two source novels differ greatly, as can be expected with two works coming from opposite ends of the twentieth century. Charles George Douglas Roberts was born in 1860 to Anglican parson George Goodridge Roberts and his wife, Emma Bliss (the poet Bliss Carman's aunt), just outside of Fredericton. Before their eldest son turned two, the Roberts family moved to Westcock parish, just outside of Sackville, NB, on the Tantramar Marshes, where the future poet would spend his formative years until the family returned to Fredericton in 1873. Roberts's first publication came out in 1880, and over the next 60 years he became a force in the developing literary scene in Canada, recognized with numerous national and international awards before his death in 1943. *The Heart that Knows*, written only one year after his father's death, was extremely important to Roberts because, as he noted in several instances, this was

one of the most intimate and personal of all my prose works. Westcock and Westcock Parsonage, and all the surrounding country, are faithfully described; 'the Rector' is a true picture of my beloved father; the Rector's wife, a loving portrait of my mother; many of the other characters are from life; many of the incidents—actions of my father—are fact; and much of my own boyhood is in the boyhood of Luella's little irregular son. (qtd. in Pomeroy 198)

In the novel, Jim Calder and Luella Warden are engaged to be married, but Jim is tricked into thinking Luella has been unfaithful, so he sails off to wander the sea. Meanwhile, Luella faces the judgemental ostracism of the local women in Westcock, especially once she can no longer hide her pregnancy. Twenty years pass. Luella's child, Seth, grows into a strapping youth who goes off to sea to find and kill the man who betrayed his mother. As chance would have it, the two men end up on the same ship somewhere in the western Pacific, but since both have disguised their names, each doesn't know who the other is. They bond when Seth saves Jim's life in a brawl and Jim saves Seth from shark-infested waters. Eventually the true identity of Jim becomes apparent to Seth, but he cannot bring himself to kill his father. The two are reunited, and the novel ends with their return to Westcock and the long-delayed marriage of Luella and Jim.

The plot structure recalls the romance quest, while the pastoral, affectionate description of Westcock and the Tantramar countryside, if not always sympathetic to its attitudes, echoes the rural idyll, both popular literary forms at the turn of the twentieth century. However, the novel received relatively little critical notice when it first appeared, overshadowed by Roberts's more formidable reputation for animal stories and poetry (see MacMillan xvii-xviii). Although reprinted in the 1920s, the novel, along with Roberts's fiction generally, fell out of favour in the age of modernism. In the 1980s, however, there was an increased interest in Roberts, with symposia, new collections, and a new biography by John Adams in 1986. This novel, too, shared in the growing interest in the author, with two new editions in 1984 and 2002. In the immediate region, Roberts's depiction of a bygone time attracted attention in an era keen to kindle nostalgic connections to a somewhat romanticized past, and the novel's *radical* treatment of an unwed mother makes its otherwise melodramatic plot more palatable to modern readers (MacMillan xvii; Scobie 50-2). Likewise, the choice of this somewhat quaint, locally set, and nostalgically inspired text from the pen of a national icon was also a fitting addition to Sackville's 2008 Culture Capital programming that "highlight[ed] the municipality's artistic creativity, regional history, community achievements, and natural charm," cited as part of the reason for Heritage Canada's award ("Sackville Named a 2008 Culture Capital," A8).

Like *Pélagie-la-charrette*, the English novel moves in a forward linear fashion, spanning a number of years (twenty to *Pélagie's* ten) and incorporating a whole community of characters. But, unlike the Acadian novel, *The Heart that Knows* is told from the point of view of a single third-person omniscient narrator whose identity is never made clear. This very traditional narrative structure does not sit easily with some modern critics who find that "Roberts intrudes in *The Heart that Knows* from the very beginning, not only upon the text, but into the narrative...by acting as mediator within the narrative, rather than...giving it life on its own" (Moss 93). The directness and simplicity of the narrative line, however, are directly related to the formalist view of history the novel constructs, and which will be key to the stage adaptation.

*Pélagie-la-charrette* author Antonine Maillet, on the other hand, was born in 1929 in Bouctouche, NB, and was educated in Moncton, Montreal, and Québec City where she received her Doctorat ès lettres in 1970. She began writing in the 1950s, but it wasn't until the creation of *La Sagouine* in 1971 that she began to take her place as the leading Acadian writer of her generation. In both theatre and fiction, Maillet has written about the emerging nation of Acadie in a coloured, roughened language that suggests a specific locality but constructs a mythic past, both distant and not-so-distant, and has been instrumental in giving contemporary Acadie a voice and an image of its past self that has accompanied, not always without controversy, its evolution into a modern society in ways previous generations could not have conceived possible.

The novel tells the story of Pélagie, who, after fifteen years of exile in Georgia following the deportation of Acadians from Nova Scotia in 1755, gathers her family together and begins the overland trek in ox-drawn carts back to Acadie-in-the-north. The epic journey takes ten years and along the way its voyagers must overcome many obstacles. In the process, they gather other Acadian exiles they encounter, “bringing back,” like Moses, “whole tribes of...countrymen and women to their own lands by the back door” (*Pélagie: The Return to Acadie* 251). The novel caught the imagination of the public, and Maillet’s recognition with France’s prestigious Prix Goncourt (the first ever non-French national recipient) won the novel wide and lasting critical and popular interest, inspired by its “synecdoche of community heritage ‘telling itself’...on behalf of a people waylaid by history” (Giltrow and Stouck).

The novel *Pélagie-la-charrette* has three branches of narrative diegesis as the contemporary narrator relates the story told to her by a cousin about their nineteenth-century relatives’ retelling of the original eighteenth-century trek, and all three periods—the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century narratives—are interwoven throughout the novel, complicated by the fact that the generations of characters are linked by genealogy. So the novel is not just an originary story of a people, but a story about story-telling, about the power of narrative, and in particular of oral history as a binding force that casts and recasts the identity of community, and of nation. The writing “embodies the proximities of oral recitation,...contacting the audience’s memory in ways which literate narrative does not” (Giltrow and Stouck).

Roberts’s novel was an exercise in nostalgia, both in his own time, as he looked back and attempted to reconstruct his memory of his own childhood days, and for the modern Sackville reader, who in a time of economic and demographic hardship seeks confirmation of a romanticized past as something golden, but lost. The single, monologic narration tells the story to the reader, effectively separating narrator and communities, both diegetic and receptive. These contrast to Maillet’s novel, albeit also nostalgic in its own way, as a romantic performance of a past time, but not as something lost and viewed through the soft lens of wistful remembrance. Rather the past in *Pélagie-la-charrette* is a place of rediscovery, a source and a celebration of what the reader is today. The multi-layered, dialogic narration brings the identifying reader into the telling, into the creation of community across time and space.

## The Adaptations

In 2006, Linda Hutcheon provided a framework for developing, as the title of her book suggests, “a theory of adaptation.” The two productions under examination here fit her general definition of adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art” (170). More specifically, Hutcheon categorizes adaptations by examining the interactions of three fundamental “modes of engagement”: telling, showing, and interacting (22).

Both of the works examined here involve the same interactive transformation, that of shifting from “telling” to “showing” modes: from narrative literature, where “engagement begins in the realm of the imagination...unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural,” to stage performance, the “realm of direct perception” (Hutcheon 23). This particular adaptation mode involves a complex process where “description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds, and visual images. [Where c]onflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible” (40). Both novels are substantial in length and incident-rich with a complexity of plotlines and settings, making the move from literary “telling” to scenic “showing” dependent on external technology and physicalization. Though challenging, each production called upon different strategies to effect the transition. In addition, according to Hutcheon, because adaptations “engage in time and space, within a particular society and a general culture,...[t]he contents of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic” (28). Therefore, the shifts in the stories in these cases can be read as sites for the performance of the particular cultures. The concept of adaptation as “repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7, 173) also locates the spaces between the source and target texts that allow for the observation of the construction of communal identity through the performance of history.

With this in mind, we can see how the stage version of *Pélagie* had the challenge of shifting not only from telling to showing modes but from this particularly complex telling mode that embodied the idea of “history telling” itself as an identity performative. The adaptation solution chosen by Maillet, who also wrote the script for the Pays de la Sagouine production, was the addition of an allegorical character called “History,” a living, breathing character against whom the Acadians struggle. “History” is depicted as a flouncing, effeminate fop, who decrees that “L’Acadie est morte” (Maillet,

*Pélagie* 8), its page in the book of the world done, and so it should accept its fate. However, the Acadian refugees are able to outsmart and outmanoeuvre “History,” proving themselves more resilient and more heroic by overcoming even this, the greatest of foes. The complex and subtle implications of the novel are boiled down to an epic struggle between two forces in the stage version. While it may reflect common wisdom that such a shift from novel to stage must of necessity call for such a simplification (Hutcheon 36), these particular choices reveal the intentional performance of an Acadian history that excises its complexities, past and present, and smooths out the tensions and nuances of lived experience. The result is a more palatably exportable construction that suits the tourist context of the show, but which also speaks to the presence of larger, national aspirations in the performance of Acadian identity in New Brunswick.

In adapting Roberts’s novel for the stage, Charlie Rhindress went in the opposite direction, creating a narrator figure who speaks directly to the audience, fills in the background information, helps bridge the gaps in time between scenes, and explains aspects of the characters who appear. At first the narrator seems to parallel the omniscience of Roberts’s narrator, but in a sudden rupture of the dramaturgical structure shifts to first-person narration in act two (Rhindress, *The Heart that Knows* 38), self-identifying as and subsequently playing scenes in the role of the twenty-year-old Seth who goes off to sea. The transformation from omniscient narrator to committed character late in the play invites the audience to view the play as a retelling from the perspective of the now-adult Seth. His “retelling” becomes a self-conscious construction of history. However, this “history” cannot be entirely from his own memory since he also recounts events that took place before he was born, repeating and compiling stories from other people’s memories. Seth thus embodies the performance of the stories he has inherited about his origins as well as of his own self-narratives, all retold and re-performed for the audience in the theatre representation. In this way, Rhindress’s stage play introduces the importance of generational narratives in the performance of identity and history, quite in contrast to the highly monological retelling of history Roberts’s novel performs, with its confident, omniscient “historian” narrator.

Rhindress’s adaptation strategy, then, ironically, is very similar to the way the narrative layers of Maillet’s novel function, layers that Maillet reduced and simplified for her stage version. He starts with the monologic retelling of Roberts’s novel, but then breaks away from “telling” to “being,” from the stage performance of the narrator’s depiction of events, like Roberts’s omniscient narrator, to the character’s “performative” performance of self, as the teller becomes the “told” and embodies the generational narratives of his identity, like the layered narrations of Maillet’s novel. The nuance of this adaptation strategy foregrounds the importance of local community, an idea present but not central in the novel, by bringing the audience more directly into the construction of character and performance of communal memory. Maillet’s inverse strategy of reducing the multiple generational perspectives of the novel to a monologic form in the musical spectacle also puts the focus on one particular aspect of the novel, the performance of heroic nation building.

## The Productions

Just as Rhindress’s humanized and intimate adaptation suited the smaller and more intimate Live Bait space, so did Maillet’s simplifications respond to the need to be read through the complexities of a huge stage spectacle at Pays de la Sagouine. *Pélagie* was a show with, figuratively, a cast of thousands, or at least that is the impression the *mise en scène* suggested. The show featured sixteen professional actors to carry the principal speaking roles and upwards of sixty local amateurs to fill in the crowd scenes. (The costs of staging professional theatre today make such large casts rare, and so the staging created a major impact.) Combining a cohort of professional principals with a large number of local amateur crowd-fillers is not uncommon, however, in French Canadian outdoor spectacles dating back at least to the 1930s. There are similar light and sound extravaganzas still regularly produced in Saguenay and Québec City, for example, also designed to celebrate local and “national” history. The incorporation of large numbers of local performers not only generates impressive stage visuals but also creates a kind of social cohesion and a sense of belonging with and through the investment of the larger community.

Live Bait’s *The Heart that Knows* was a more modest affair with a cast of seven professional actors and no amateur “fill-ins”—still a considerable size for a modern Equity cast, but, relative to the epic proportions of *Pélagie*, effecting a greater sense of intimacy. The number of characters in the adaptation exceeded seven, however, with several actors playing more than one role. This strategic and dramaturgical use of doubling is not an uncommon way around the practical limits of cast size, and doubling can also create powerful visual parallels as the audience witnesses theatrical and metaphoric transformations and multiple image overlays. In contrast to the way *Pélagie* wrote the community large, the

theatrical strategy at Live Bait brought the audience into the most intimate perspective on the creation of character by witnessing the transformation of actor into character and the layering of character upon character.

Like the cast sizes, the other production elements also suggested different ways of interpreting history. *Pélagie* was billed as a “mega spectacle [of] inspiring music, songs, special effects, lasers and fireworks” (Pays de la Sagouine 7). And the show lived up to its billing. From the laser-created holograph of the famous Captain Beausoleil’s full-masted ship sailing across Bouctouche Bay to land at the foot of the theatre, to the tragic burning of Grand-Pré created in the distance with fireworks on the Île-aux-Puces theme park, to the misty blood-red sound and light of simulated revolutionary battle, to the final apotheosis of *Pélagie* rising high above the stage crowd on an elevating platform, her kerchief waving in the breeze and her face illuminated in heroic light, the show was an almost overwhelming feast of sights and images. It called upon the full special effects potential of modern outdoor theatre technology to instil a superhuman quality to the historical retelling. The fully orchestrated music playing over loudspeakers (no orchestra present) was like the musical scoring of a movie supporting the emotional dynamics and reinforcing the strong patriotic fervour of the visuals. Aria-like solos and full-company choruses frequently built on traditional Acadian tunes, such as the “Ave Maris Stella” and “Au Clair de la Lune,” and many of the members of the audience joined in the singing of familiar lyrics.

In contrast, the Live Bait production emphasized the intimate and human element rather than the spectacular. The music featured a small acoustic ensemble of flute, guitar, percussion, and keyboard that supported songs that stirred feelings of nostalgia for a vaguely historical past. Musical director Jennie Wood intentionally chose the songs to give a sense of the period. In terms of staging, although the melodramatic novel contained events that could have led to a more extravagant presentation—like the ship fire that begins it or the various gun battles and daring rescues that dog the wandering sailors—Rhindress, along with production director Mary Ellen MacLean, took their adaptation in the opposite direction. The novel follows the sailors to ports and sights around the world, but it also presents the home, the land, and the characters of Westcock with affection. This adaptation and production chose to stress these interpersonal and familial aspects. The more overtly dramatic spectacles depicted in the novel and necessary for the plot development of the story, like Melissa’s death by knifing during a dockside riot in Barcelona, are moved off stage and simply reported to other characters (and the audience) via stories or letters. The adaptation thus dramatizes more intimate, personal moments like Melissa’s theft of Luella’s writing paper, which she uses to dupe Jim into believing in Luella’s infidelity, a moment mentioned only in passing in the novel by the simple words “She had got the paper Luella always used” (Roberts 56). Seven words in the novel become a five-minute scene in the stage adaptation.

Through these transformations, the Live Bait version of Roberts’s novel scaled the story down to human proportions, whereas in *Pélagie* the story is scaled upwards into “the commemorative grandeur associated with the great national epics” (Giltrow and Stouck). This contrastive scaling and emphasis on the construction of differing national historical imaginaries is also evidenced in the theatre architectures and locations for the shows, which have an important relationship to audience reception.

## Location and Reception

Hutcheon makes a simple though useful observation about the reception of adaptations that concerns the fact that audiences must have some awareness of the primary text in order to be able to recognize and read the work *as* an adaptation; without this “palimpsestuous intertextuality” (Hutcheon 6), the works are simply received as autonomous originals. Further, the impact of this relationship varies depending on the nature and degree of the audience’s awareness and preconditioning regarding the source text and regarding the tension between the works as originals and their palimpsestic condition as adaptations. It is not just a question of whether the audience knows or does not know the original, but *how* that audience knows it that affects their reading of the adaptation.

*Pélagie* audiences, for example, are likely to pre-know the novel, so are more likely to approach the show *as* an adaptation. They will have at least almost certainly heard of Maillet and have some consciousness of her writing and its relationship to Acadian identification and history, mythologized and contained in uncomplicated pre-readings as it may be. So they have a horizon of expectation regarding the performance of Acadian history and nation building, relating to the novel itself and/or to its reputation.

Fittingly, then, the Maillet mega-spectacle was produced in the 800-seat outdoor amphitheatre, aptly named “La scène Antonine-Maillet” and located overlooking Bouctouche Bay in the Acadian theme park, Pays de la Sagouine. The

amphitheatre style clearly recalls the classical Greek theatres of antiquity, the birthplaces of Western theatre. And just like at the Greek outdoor sites, the backdrop for the performance here is the country itself. Just as when the tragic gods spoke of “here,” regardless of the setting of the play, the audience heard and understood the words in sight of the hills and perspective of the Attic nation in front of them. So too is the audience for *Pélagie* invited to read the “here” of this mythic epic in the clear context of the Acadian hinterland across the bay that formed the backdrop to this performance. With its wooden construction and thrust stage it is also reminiscent of another so-called national stage, that of Ontario’s Stratford Festival Theatre.

The type of theatre architecture and the location of the theatre in the heart of Pays de la Sagouine may be said, then, to pre-configure such a mega-spectacle, but in fact its thrust stage and classical architectural allusions could equally accommodate more domestic quests and familial struggles. One thinks of Shakespeare’s theatre or even the Greek tragedies that set aside spectacle in favour of poetry and character. In this light, the technical spectacularization of *Pélagie* was a result of clear choices, perhaps related to the tradition of such epic shows in French Canada, not so common in English Canada, but having a profound effect on how Acadian history is read by the audience as a grand collective spectacle.

The Pays de la Sagouine is a tourist site generating considerable economic interest and welcoming thousands of paying visitors every summer, but it is also, due to its association with Maillet, seen as a jewel in the crown of the Acadian national image. On the gate to the theatre is a modest plaque commemorating the “spectacle du Nouveau-Brunswick” held on the site for the international heads of state who gathered in Moncton for the millennial Sommet de la francophonie in 1999. Here Maillet herself reminded the gathered heads of state that, even though Acadians had achieved some measure of success in preserving their language and culture, they could never let their guard down or take for granted the threats to their culture (Chiasson, “Un symbole fort”). Visitors are repeatedly invited to read the theatre as a site of nation-building, where Acadie can be proud of its role in global history and its struggle as a people.

Both the novel and adaptation of *Pélagie*, then, carry the high profile name recognition of their author, Antonine Maillet, the “Acadian Avenger.”<sup>2</sup> The subject of numerous articles, critiques, and commentaries, Maillet makes frequent public appearances in the area and brings with her a nearly star-like following. On a day I visited Pays de la Sagouine in 2008, a climax for adoring crowds was that both Maillet and Viola Léger made themselves available for pictures (Léger is the actor who made “La Sagouine” so famous). The two were, quite literally, mobbed by the crowd, and security personnel were required to maintain order.

The theme park promotes itself heavily in the Quebec tourist market and Maillet is herself well known there,<sup>3</sup> but there seemed little distinction in audience reactions between visitors and locals. Maillet’s historicized “Acadie” has been instrumental in giving Acadians an image of themselves at a critical time in their construction of cultural identity. But it is also a quaint and non-threatening image of Acadie, and easily adopted by outsiders, particularly as performed by Pays de la Sagouine. Modern, dynamic, urban Acadie struggles with these constructions of itself, and contemporary artists continue to challenge Acadian identity (see, for example, Chiasson, “Traversées”); however, the simple, binary heroics of the *Pélagie* spectacle were as fascinating to tourists, reinforcing their concepts of what “Acadie” is, as to locals, who could escape from their real lives into an idyllic fantasy world, as clichéd as its historical and cultural markers were.

In contrast, the Live Bait audience for *The Heart that Knows* is likely to experience a rather different preconditioning of intertextual layers. It is unlikely that audience members would have read the novel. Although somewhat known in the local region, the novel is rarely taught in high schools and only occasionally in CanLit courses at the university level. On the other hand, the author, Charles G.D. Roberts, is relatively well known, his poetry and animal stories widely taught. So while the audience may not have come to *The Heart that Knows* musical with pre-knowledge of the novel, they did come with a horizon of expectations regarding Roberts as a literary icon, but here things can get sticky. Roberts is generally claimed by centrist Canadian critics as a “father” of *Canadian* poetry, his connections with New Brunswick frequently either exoticized as that “other” that counterbalances his “real” literary work or somewhat embarrassingly put over as his “regional” phase that he happily grew out of on his move to Toronto (Bentley 26). So while New Brunswickers take pride in claiming his Maritime origins, that claim is always conditional on the subordination to larger “national” assertions bound up with often problematic reactions to how the Maritimes relate to Canadian society as a whole.

Likewise, the adaptor of *The Heart that Knows*, Charlie Rhindress, also inspires his audience, but in ways different from Maillet. Rhindress was co-founder of Live Bait Theatre in 1988, along with the current Artistic Director, Karen Valanne, and he and his many original plays over the years were closely associated with the company. As a result, the production had strong name recognition locally for both the original author and the stage adaptor. Along with that came certain expectations related to the company's reputation for comedy and dinner theatre pieces, even though it produced other kinds of plays as well. Rhindress's two published plays, for example, focus on a national icon of popular music, Rita MacNeil (*Flying on her Own*, produced in 2000) and on lampooning stereotypes of Maritime life ("The Maritime Way of Life," produced in 1997). In general, though, audiences come to Live Bait expecting lighter fare with a local flavour. Like Pays de la Sagouine, Live Bait Theatre has long been a source of popular summer and seasonal entertainment, musicals, dinner theatre, and comedies. And Live Bait Theatre has produced more original New Brunswick theatre in English than any other theatre company in the province, but it does not have a strong public association with nation building in the way that the Acadian companies do, and in particular the Pays de la Sagouine.

Not surprisingly, the physical aspects of the Live Bait Theatre also reflect these different preconditions. Although the company recently celebrated its twentieth year of operation (a remarkable milestone for any professional theatre in Canada), it only acquired a permanent theatre venue as recently as 2004. A renovated former fitness gym in downtown Sackville just off the grocery store parking lot and behind a local pharmacy provides the company with a large indoor space with relatively high ceilings free of supporting pillars. Geographically positioned in the heart of Sackville's retail and business environment, the former commercial site suggested to the audience of *The Heart that Knows* that the play be read as an object of consumption first and a site of meaning second. As the play accentuated the intimate, familial, and local, the theatre itself was, literally, part of Main Street, physically connected to the fabric of local and daily life in the community.<sup>4</sup> This contrasts to the Pays de la Sagouine site, which, though a tourist attraction and a significant economic engine in the area, is the highlight of a pilgrimage, physically and emotionally removed from urban reality, well off the main roads and into the theme-park atmosphere of simulated Acadian memory, a place of discovery away from the daily life of the "Acadie" it purports to perform.

## Conclusion

While *Pélagie-la-charrette* may be read as epic, at its core it is a story of story-tellers, emphasized in the complex narrative structure that the Pays de la Sagouine adaptation erases in order to restructure the show around the epic journey and originary struggle against "History." As the object of pilgrimage and far removed from modern life in a "theme park" that *performs* "Acadian nationalism," the adaptation text, production values, and performance style all contributed to a grand spectacle that read the Acadian story as national, epic, and heroic. On the English side, the domestication of *The Heart that Knows* likewise worked against the melodramatic spectacle of the novel. Choices were made to retell the story by emphasizing the link between heart and land and eliminating the many more visually exciting scenes, while consciously building the history of a distinct people of sea-faring but homebound nature (see MacMillan ix). The Live Bait production, theatre architecture, and performance location reinforced the intimate accent of this adaptation, performing the local and immediate identity markers over more potentially troubling "national" ones. These contrasts are not unusual in Acadian and English theatre in the province.

Acadian theatre in the last four decades has taken a crucial role in performing the various emerging identities of a minority fighting its way back from repression and neglect. This has been effected through many theatrical forms, the mythologization of an epic history being just one of them. *Pélagie* speaks to the larger collective identity formation and, while one may debate the accuracy of either the particular historicization or the unitary view of Acadie that the epic promotes, the success of this form of spectacle to capture and develop the imaginary of a people is without doubt. The English community has a different battle. Within New Brunswick, the English may be the majority and may gesture to claiming identification with cultural stars like Roberts, but always in that claim is the irresistible doubt that they, and their stars, belong to some other larger dominant identity, that somewhere else to which New Brunswickers subsume their regional identity. The response of *The Heart that Knows* to this tension is to look inward for its performance of history: to the family, to the sentiments, and to the land itself. The search for agency through generational story-telling is not only Seth's story as retold by Live Bait, but is also the quest that English-language theatre in New Brunswick continues to pursue.



**Glen Nichols** is Director of Drama at Mount Allison University. He is the editor of *Theatre Research in Canada*. He has published articles on theatre history, Acadian drama and theatre, and theatre translation. In 2003, he edited and translated *Angels and Anger* (Playwrights Canada Press), a collection of five contemporary Acadian plays.

## Work Cited

- Adams, John Coldwell. *Sir Charles God Damn: The Life of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1986. Print.
- “Antonine Maillet: Acadian Avenger.” *Adrienne Clarkson Presents*. CBC 29 December 1992. Television. CBC Digital Archives. Web. 24 July 2010. <[http://archives.cbc.ca/arts\\_entertainment/literature/topics/1779/](http://archives.cbc.ca/arts_entertainment/literature/topics/1779/)>.
- Bentley, D.M.R. “The Poetics of Roberts’ Tantramar Space.” *The Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium, Mount Allison University (1982)*. Ed. Carrie MacMillan. Sackville, N.B.: Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, 1984. 17-41. Print. Anchorage Series 1.
- Chiasson, Gaëtan. “Un symbole fort.” *CapAcadie* (2010). Web. 20 July 2010 <<http://www.capacadie.com/print/node/91127>>.
- Chiasson, Herménégilde. “Traversées.” *Tangence* 58 (1998): 77-92. Print.
- Cogswell, Fred, and Jo-Anne Elder, eds. and trans. *Unfinished Dreams: Contemporary Poetry of Acadie*. Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane, 1990. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. “Performative Language.” *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Ed. Jonathan Culler. London: Oxford UP, 1997. 94-107. Print.
- Doyle, James. “The American Critical Reaction to Roberts.” *The Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium, Mount Allison University (1982)*. Ed. Carrie MacMillan. Sackville, N.B.: Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, 1984. 99-115. Print. Anchorage Series 1.
- Gair, Reavley, Richard Guerin, Robert Whalen, and Henri-Dominique Paratte, eds. *A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick*. Fredericton: Goose Lane & Fiddlehead, 1985. Print.
- Giltrow, Janet, and David Stouck. “‘Survivors of the night’: The language and politics of epic in Antonine Maillet’s *Pelagie-la-charrette*.” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71.3 (2002): 735. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Knowles, Richard Paul. *Reading the Material Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Loneragan, David, and Théâtre l’Escaouette. *La création à coeur: l’histoire du théâtre l’Escaouette*. Tracadie-Sheila, N.-B.: La Grande Marée, 2000. Print.
- Lord, Marie-Linda. *Marginalité et identité dans l’oeuvre romanesque d’Antonine Maillet et de David Adams Richards: esquisse du sociogramme du protagoniste marginal*. [Moncton, N.-B.]: Département d’études françaises, Faculté des arts, Université de Moncton, 2001. Print.
- MacDonald, Michael J. “Introduction.” *The Heart that Knows*. By Charles G.D. Roberts. Sackville, NB: Ralph Pickard Bell Library, Mount Allison University, 1984. i-xiii. Print.

MacMillan, Carrie "Introduction." *The Heart that Knows*. By Charles G.D Roberts. Halifax: Formac, 2002. i-xviii. Print.

Maillet, Antonine. *Pélagie*. 2006. Bouctouche. Unpublished ts. Bouctouche.

---. *Pélagie: The Return to Acadie*. Trans. Philip Stratford. Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane, 2004. Print.

Moss, John. "Writing to the Reader: The Novels of Sir Charles G.D. Roberts." *The Proceedings of the Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Symposium, Mount Allison University (1982)*. Ed. Carrie MacMillan. Sackville, N.B.: Centre for Canadian Studies, Mount Allison University, 1984. 87-98. Print. Anchorage Series 1.

Mullaly, Edward. *Desperate Stages: New Brunswick Theatre in the 1840's*. Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane, 1987. Print.

Nichols, Glen. "Building Bridges: English & French Theatre in New Brunswick." *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches théâtrales au Canada* 26.1-2 (2005): 4-18. Print.

Pays de la Sagouine. *Season program*. Bouctouche: Pays de la Sagouine, 2008. Print.

Pomeroy, E.M. *Sir Charles G.D. Roberts: A Biography*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1943. Print.

Rhindress, Charlie. *Flying on her Own*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2008. Print.

---. *The Heart that Knows*. Unpublished ts. Music and lyrics by Dean Burry. First produced: Sackville, Live Bait Theatre: July 2007 (Dir. Mary Ellen MacLean).

---. "The Maritime Way of Life." *Marigraph: Gauging the Tides of Drama from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island*. Ed. Bruce Barton. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2004. 1-49. Print.

Roberts, Charles G.D. *The Heart that Knows*. 1906. Introduction by Carrie MacMillan. Halifax: Formac, 2002. Print.

"Sackville Named a 2008 Culture Capital." *Times and Transcript* [Moncton, NB] 3 July 2007: A8. Print.

Scobie, Charles H. H. *Roberts Country: Sir Charles G.D. Roberts and the Tantramar*. Sackville, N.B.: Tantramar Heritage Society, 2008.

Smith, Mary Elizabeth. *Too Soon the Curtain Fell: A History of Theatre in Saint John, 1789-1900*. Fredericton, N.B.: Brunswick Press, 1981. Print.

Wood, Jennie. Personal interview. 23 July 2010.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Janet Giltrow and David Stouck developed an extensive argument in 2002 regarding the epic nature of *Pélagie-la-charrette* and its relationship to nationalism and national identity.

<sup>2</sup> This is the title of Adrienne Clarkson's 1992 CBC interview of Maillet, see ("Antonine Maillet: Acadian Avenger").

<sup>3</sup> Witness the city of Montreal's renaming the street that Maillet lives on there as Avenue Antonine Maillet in honour of her 1979 Prix Goncourt for *Pélagie-la-charrette*.

<sup>4</sup> It is not unconnected to this idea that Live Bait Theatre space is also often rented out to locals for wedding receptions, business meetings, and other non-theatrical functions. Its geography is a dynamic as well as a static performance of local community.