

Reading *The Bricklin*: Narrating the Place of Dreaming in an Era of Self-Sufficiency

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Abstract

The Bricklin: An Automotive Fantasy traces the rise and fall of efforts to build Malcolm Bricklin's signature sports car in rural New Brunswick in the early 1970s. I read *The Bricklin* as an effort by contemporary Atlantic Canadian writers and artists to highlight how the history of place shapes experience without replicating formulaic conceptions of rural life on the East Coast. Rather than subverting fetishized versions of an anti-modern Atlantic Canada, *The Bricklin* both critiques and celebrates the nostalgic exploration of place.

Résumé

The Bricklin: An Automotive Fantasy retrace l'essor et le déclin des efforts déployés pour construire la voiture de sport signée Malcolm Bricklin en région rurale du Nouveau-Brunswick dans le début des années 1970. J'ai considéré *The Bricklin* comme un effort des écrivains et artistes contemporains du Canada atlantique à souligner à quel point l'histoire d'une région façonne l'expérience sans pour autant se rattacher aux conceptions stéréotypées de la vie rurale de la côte Est. De fait, *The Bricklin* réussit à la fois à critiquer et célébrer l'exploration nostalgique d'un endroit plutôt que de renverser des versions fétichisées d'un Canada atlantique anti-moderniste.

If, as Herb Wyile argues in *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic Canadian Literature*, one reason “for the growing preoccupation with history” in Atlantic Canada “is the anxiety occasioned by the mobility, deracination, and sense of placelessness that characterizes our highly technological, globalized consumer society” (232), what might the recent success of Theatre New Brunswick's *The Bricklin* contribute to studies of the region and its revisionings of the past?¹

Premiered in the summer of 2010, *The Bricklin* traces the rise and fall of efforts to build Malcolm Bricklin's signature sports car in rural New Brunswick. Championed by the premier of the day, Richard Hatfield, the sports car's much publicized potential ensured his re-election to the top post in 1974. The Bricklin epitomized the possibility of attracting manufacturing jobs to Atlantic Canada, and especially rural areas in deep economic decline. Revived in a musical form, the story of *The Bricklin* can read as part of a sustained effort by Atlantic Canadian writers and artists, including Lisa Moore and Lynn Coady, to shift perception of the region by highlighting how the history of place shapes experience without inevitably replicating formulaic conceptions of rural life on the East Coast.² In her introduction to *Victory Meat: New Fiction from Atlantic Canada*, which takes its title from a downtown Fredericton butcher shop, Coady echoes Wyile's concern with the impact of globalization on the region, noting that “Atlantic Canadians, and Atlantic Canadian writers, have grown up right alongside the rest of the Western world” (3). The result, in the case of *Victory Meat*, as Coady explains, is a collection of stories that portray “alienation” and often subvert the traditional

narratives “about *home*, about belonging” that have become equated with Atlantic Canadian identity (4). While Coady, Wyile, and others resist the fetishized versions of a traditionally anti-modern Atlantic Canada, *The Bricklin* takes a somewhat differently route—literally and figuratively—by critiquing and concurrently engaging in a nostalgic exploration of place. It is a musical that is both unwilling to ignore Hatfield’s financial naiveté and delighted by his desire to dream on an international scale on behalf of New Brunswick.

Exploiting the clichés of the 1970s, the musical employs Hatfield’s media moniker, “Disco Dick,” and the aura of the disco era to trace the impact of this promised prosperity on two different groups of people: working-class individuals living in the small town of Minto, New Brunswick (represented by a couple named Michelle and Gerrard), and the city men who undertook this enterprise, including the cosmopolitan Hatfield and the American business tycoon, Malcolm Bricklin. As the title of the signature song from the musical emphasizes, the creation of the Bricklin sports car is an inherently “High Risk Venture” that succeeds initially because the car seduces everyone who falls under its gaze, including Hatfield (Ledoux and Cole 10). The central themes of the musical connect sports cars to masculine sexual prowess, and detail the struggles of rural populations in New Brunswick trying to find meaningful and well-paying jobs, issues that resonate with a broad range of audiences. Yet, to fully comprehend the ironic and humorous dimensions of the play, the specificity of the spectacular rise and fall of the Bricklin sports car necessitates insider knowledge of the cities of Fredericton and Saint John as well as the town of Minto and the broader framework of the province of New Brunswick. *The Bricklin* also suggests a belated effort to resurrect the possibility of dreams—even those that fail—for future generations of New Brunswickers.

The concerns of *The Bricklin* are especially timely given the agenda of self-sufficiency officially introduced by the provincial Liberal government in 2007. The current Conservative government has adopted this program to counter the “out-migration” of workers to access employment opportunities and to address the increasing economic divide between rural and urban populations within the province (Savoie, 237). In fact, the musical enacts one potential model for harnessing the business-driven “neoliberal agenda” that has dominated New Brunswick politics for the past twenty-five years, starting with the government of Frank McKenna (Tremblay, “Theorizing” 246). *The Bricklin* offers a compelling example of the impact culture can have in negotiating a path toward social and economic renewal.

In the concluding essay of a recently published collection about New Brunswick’s focus on self-sufficiency, Tony Tremblay notes that “it is not an industry cluster...that roots a people to place, but an identity, that which affirms their sense of belonging” (258). Given that identity is “produced by narrative/story,” remembering and articulating versions of the past becomes a critical element in creating sustained “economic health” (257). Dominant stereotypes of the Atlantic region and the province, especially as cultivated by the rest of Canada, often present a nostalgic touristic gaze (as explored most notably by Ian McKay). *The Bricklin* invokes, cultivates, and yet, at times, subverts such an easy assessment of New Brunswick in the 1970s. The musical’s satirical representation of New Brunswick’s marginalization by central Canada and interest in a North-South trade axis recalls a pre-Confederation model of regional prosperity. Such a combination of perspectives can be used to propel the province to move forward while concurrently learning from past mistakes. *The Bricklin* dramatizes the linkages between culture, economics, and region with a good-humoured yet poignant honesty that ultimately celebrates the value of place and the rich resources of the community, including its people.

To understand the story behind the Bricklin's rise and fall necessitates knowing the contexts that shaped the partnership of Richard Hatfield and Malcolm Bricklin. Each man played a key role in building the first sports car in New Brunswick. Hatfield became premier of the province in the fall of 1970, defeating the incumbent Liberal, Louis J. Robichaud. His triumph marked a seemingly dramatic shift in New Brunswick politics, displacing the Francophone Robichaud. Robichaud's Equal Opportunity Program and ten years in power had led to a substantial integration of Francophones into civil service, the centralization of education and health care, the provincial assumption of municipal debts, and a commitment to improving the economies of northern and south eastern New Brunswick (Starr 23). Born in northern New Brunswick in 1931, Hatfield was the unilingual Anglophone son of a prosperous potato chip plant owner who served as mayor of Hartland and then "a Conservative MP for Victoria-Carleton, a job he held until his death...in 1952" (Starr 5). Hatfield grew up familiar with federal politics, but displayed an early aversion to it. He was educated at Acadia and studied to be a lawyer at Dalhousie University, yet practised only briefly before joining the family business, with an eye to becoming a provincial politician. Hatfield served as an MLA for nine years prior to being elected premier and was aware that, despite Canada's national prosperity, the Atlantic region remained largely dependent upon federal monies and challenged by the costs of transporting goods westward. While voted in as Anglophone, Hatfield strongly supported Robichaud's Equal Opportunity policies, and over the course of his time as premier he became regarded, paradoxically, as committed to ensuring Acadian rights in the province.

Yet Hatfield had to negotiate a delicate balance between French and English interests. In particular, the creation of the Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE) in 1969 by the federal government targeted the majority of its budget at Atlantic Canada with the intention of using subsidies to bring business to the urban areas of the region, which meant that Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton were the focal points in New Brunswick. Although Hatfield "lobbied hard and with some success to get DREE money into the [Acadian] northeast," grants went to the primarily Anglophone cities in New Brunswick targeted for "growth" (Starr 60). Even Hatfield recognized the limitations imposed by a federal vision of the region. Despite its noble aims, DREE subsidies ultimately failed to create jobs in the depressed areas of the region.³

In particular, DREE refused to fund the building of the Bricklin automobile, despite Malcolm Bricklin's promise that manufacturing factories would create local employment in New Brunswick. However, this hurdle did not stop Bricklin and Hatfield from ultimately forming a partnership. Malcolm Bricklin was a brash entrepreneur who made his name and fortune at a young age by franchising hardware stores, which resulted in a number of lawsuits being filed against him in the United States. He subsequently brought the Subaru brand to the American market but sold the rights before it became popular. Eager to create a signature product, Bricklin decided to design his own prototype "gull-wing sports car," but he needed capital investment and a venue for production (Reid 468). Named the Bricklin SV-1, it was sold as the safest and sexiest sports car on the market, with its unique doors, acrylic body panels, eight-cylinder engine, steel frame safety structure, and substantial bumpers. Malcolm Bricklin strategically marketed the vehicle even before it was made, creating a short film about his dream car, building a prototype, and hiring a "salesman, who found six dealers willing to order 2000 cars" (Starr 86).

Despite these efforts, when Bricklin first sought to produce the car in a Quebec automobile factory, his overtures were rejected by the Quebec government, which refused to provide \$7 million for 40 percent ownership of the company because of its high probability of failure and Bricklin's unresolved legal troubles in America. Contacted by a Montreal accountant working on Bricklin's behalf, Multiplex, a "short-lived joint federal-provincial development agency based in Saint John," recommended that DREE grant Bricklin \$4 million ("a good send-off" to ensure his product's viability), along with admitting Bricklin into the Auto Pact of 1965, which would remove duties from imported parts used in the manufacturing process (*Bricklin Gold Portfolio* 167). DREE's "reluctance" to grant either request, coupled with Bricklin's charisma and bravado, piqued Premier Richard Hatfield's interest and his desire to put New Brunswick on the map (167). Bricklin had initially approached Hatfield to garner his support for the DREE funding, showing him the promotional film about the sports car. In the absence of federal support, Hatfield saw an opportunity to invest in a product that would give the province "a forward-looking image and an international trademark" (Cormier and Michaud 65). Moreover, the premier, himself a hip bachelor who "drove a black Mercury Cougar" and frequented "Fredericton's only discotheque" was certainly seduced by the car's "aerodynamics and pure lines," which offered just the right amount of sex appeal (47). So in June 1973, Hatfield's government paid \$500,000 for 51 percent of Bricklin Canada's shares and offered loan guarantees of \$2.8 million "for working capital" (*Bricklin Gold Portfolio* 167).

This deal marked the beginning of the rapid rise and fall of the Bricklin sports car as an innovative project, intended to "give New Brunswick economic maturity" (Cormier and Michaud 64). Factories were rapidly refurbished and opened in Minto and Saint John to produce the cars, creating immediate well-paying manufacturing jobs for the local populations. The Bricklin car was formally "unveiled at the Four Seasons Hotel in New York" by Bricklin and Hatfield in June 1974 (65). The car garnered huge international attention; it was featured in *Playboy* and Hatfield appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson in a promotional capacity. However, production schedules for the much sought-after Bricklin could not be met. The Minto factory manufactured the acrylic body panels, but the panels had a 60 percent fault rate, meaning that much of what was produced had to be scrapped. As well, a "quarter of the acceptable output was damaged in transit to the Saint John factory" (*Bricklin Gold Portfolio* 168). That factory, where the cars were assembled, was expected to generate twelve thousand cars per year but "by the end of 1974, there had been fewer than 800 cars built" (168).

Nevertheless, the car's appeal became central to Hatfield's first re-election to office. He campaigned throughout New Brunswick driving a Bricklin, in spite of its technical glitches, and was voted back into the premier's office in November of 1974. But the economic failure of this gamble was revealed only days later when Bricklin announced that he would need \$6–8 million of further capital investment by the New Brunswick government to continue. The province already had provided a shareholder loan of \$2 million in October and an additional \$1 million during the election campaign, both of which were made public. Bricklin and Hatfield continued to cling to the project, while dealerships gave up hope of ever receiving stock; at the same time, the cost of the cars continued to escalate, climbing from "about \$5,000" to "nearly \$8,000" per vehicle (Starr 95). Finally, in September 1975 the Bricklin was forced into receivership by a New Brunswick court, with losses for the province totalling close to \$25 million. As biographer Richard Starr notes, for "an industrial disaster, the Bricklin was run-of-the mill, at least in dollar terms," yet Hatfield's close ties to the project led to sustained and vehement criticism even by members of his own party, who felt that the investment in Malcolm Bricklin's venture was an example of "bad judgement and fiscal

irresponsibility” by a provincial leader who needed to find more effective ways to bolster New Brunswick’s economic future (97).

The musical story of *The Bricklin* has proved to be far more successful than the car in commercial and critical terms. *The Bricklin* played to packed houses in the late summers of 2010 and 2011. The play premiered in 2010 on Theatre New Brunswick’s cabaret stage (a converted rehearsal space), complete with table-and-chair seating, which limited audience numbers. The following summer, *The Bricklin* was performed on the main stage (a seven hundred-seat venue) and had full houses every night of its two-week run, reaching nearly ten thousand people at a cost of ten dollars per ticket. The musical was widely praised in provincial and national newspapers, even garnering a feature article in the front section of *The Globe and Mail* that celebrated the theatrical success with a cast photo and the headline, “Bringing Back the Bricklin.”

When Malcolm Bricklin came to the July 22 opening night of the 2011 run of the musical, his presence prompted increased media coverage within the province, including colour pictures of the man with the Bricklin V-1 used in the musical on the front page of both the Fredericton and Saint John newspapers. In celebration of Bricklin’s visit, the Playhouse bar debuted a signature drink, named the Acrylic, and a black-tie reception was held at the Beaverbrook Gallery following the show. Bricklin was extremely effusive in his praise for the musical, stating, “It’s fabulous...I think they did an incredible job” (Klinkenberg A8). While he attempted to create distance from the financial debacle, noting that “it’s a musical...you can’t get mad at a musical,” Bricklin also underlined the musical’s veracity by telling crowds at the end of the show, “That’s just the way I remember it...If Richard [Hatfield] is watching, I know he’s smiling” (Klinkenberg A8). In doing so, Bricklin once again played the role of salesman and idealist, revelling in the seductiveness of the sports car named after him and celebrating what was accomplished, albeit briefly, through its manufacturing in New Brunswick.

But the dangers of dreaming too big also remain part of *The Bricklin* story. Despite a great deal of regional and even national enthusiasm for the musical, Executive Director of the Playhouse, Tim Yerxa, who partnered with Theatre New Brunswick to create *The Bricklin*, insisted in 2011 that to survive the show needed to remain in Fredericton and draw tourists to the region rather than having it travel, which is an expensive and potentially risky undertaking (personal communication, July 2011). His instinct proved right when, in 2012, the Playhouse was unable to work within scheduling constraints and funding challenges to mount a third summer season of *The Bricklin*. Yet, much like the extremely profitable and internationally renowned musical, *Anne of Green Gables*, which has played every summer since 1965 to packed tourist audiences at the Confederation Centre in Charlottetown, PEI (reaching 2.37 million people over nearly five decades), *The Bricklin*’s run at the Fredericton Playhouse marks the potential creation—even if a preliminary and erratic one—of another important Fredericton cultural institution, intimately linked to the province and its capital city, where many of the key scenes of the play and the real-life drama of Malcolm Bricklin’s and Richard Hatfield’s partnership unfolded. Certainly tickets for *Anne of Green Gables* are substantially more expensive, running from \$25 to \$80 per seat, and the season is considerably longer (July to late September).

However, such a comparison suggests the possibility for future revenues for the Playhouse if framed with an eye to tourist dollars. Mindful of this opportunity, the Playhouse has also taken on the

role of archive. The theatre purchased a working Bricklin car that is used extensively in the stage show and gathered abundant memorabilia about the Bricklin and its ill-fated production in the province (including the 1996 Canada Post collectors' stamp of the Bricklin, the Canadian Mint's 2003 commemorative Bricklin coin, as well as various photographs, posters, magazine articles, and promotional materials produced by Bricklin to sell his car). These items have been put on display in the side gallery of the theatre during the show's various runs to contextualize the musical's place in the city and the province and to provide historical evidence, selective though it may be, of the car's significance to New Brunswick's history and identity.

In particular, the sourcing and upkeep of the real Bricklin car used in the show exemplifies how culture can nurture—and be sustained by—local partnerships, this one through the Playhouse's partnership with Jim Gilbert's Wheels & Deals, a local family-owned, used-car dealership.⁴ Begun over a networking lunch hosted by the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce, Gilbert heard about Tim Yerxa's desire to integrate a real Bricklin into the production and agreed to support this venture by lending his expertise. Gilbert sourced and purchased an iconic orange vintage Bricklin SV-1. He then drove it back himself from Florida and sold it to the Fredericton Playhouse at cost. As part of this partnership, Gilbert agreed to continue to care for the vehicle, including retrofitting it for stage use. In exchange, Gilbert's business was featured in the advertising and promotion of the production and his dealership displays the iconic vehicle during the more temperate months. Through relationships like these, *The Bricklin* becomes a vehicle—all puns intended—for showcasing Fredericton and New Brunswick as a culturally and economically vibrant province. And the cast of the performance itself (which is heavily populated by local talent) suggests a desire to retain a sense of historicity from within and to generate local profits from the production, instead of insisting upon measuring success in national or international terms.

Such a decision complicates potential readings of the musical in which New Brunswick is represented as a “have-not” province with a desperate need for outside intervention and validation (Boudreau, Toner, and Tremblay 1). *The Bricklin* (and, by association, the Fredericton Playhouse) thus become significant sites for rethinking both Canada-U.S. relations in regional terms but also a locale from which to explore the history of the province and Atlantic Canada in the contexts of globalization and mobility while recognizing New Brunswick as a unique and vibrant place with the cultural base to rebuild a vital economy.

Co-authored by Halifax-born playwright Paul Ledoux and Halifax-born, Fredericton-raised playwright and composer Allen Cole, and directed by Alisa Palmer, who also grew up in Fredericton during the Hatfield era, *The Bricklin* marks the return of a trio of highly accomplished individuals to Atlantic Canada. All three now reside in Toronto, but were motivated to write about the region and return to the city because of their shared fascination with and memories of 1970s' New Brunswick life. As Palmer explains in the 2010 program notes to the musical,

As I a child, I had no idea that there was anything at all unusual about building a car like that in a province like New Brunswick in an era like the 1970s. Through a child's eyes that ambitious dream seemed as plausible and legitimate as anything else. That's how dreams catch our imagination—they seem absolutely possible and absolutely necessary. (6)

This assertion of New Brunswick's right to dream and the necessity of holding on to and pursuing individual and collective ambitions in a place that is dependent on federal transfer payments for its economic survival is especially revealing because, prior to Confederation, the province and the region were both self-sufficient. Atlantic Canada cultivated profitable international maritime-based trade with the West Indies, New England, and Britain by providing fish and timber (Savoie 19). However, that success began to flounder with the advent of Confederation, which led to the introduction of federal economic protection measures. These changes included the installation of a National Policy with a tariff system that forced New Brunswick, and its Atlantic neighbours, to conduct business using domestic railroad lines rather than ships and to focus on east-west trade patterns.⁵ New Brunswick's political voice, like the other provinces in the Maritime region, was dramatically diminished with the introduction of representation by population in the newly created House of Commons. Indeed, the birth of the musical belies this post-Confederation emphasis on the sanctity of such rigidly horizontal trade routes by bringing New Brunswickers from central Canada back to their hometown to create a narrative that celebrates the richness of its provincial heritage and acknowledges the need to recapture that pre-Confederation spirit of border-crossing innovation while learning from past mistakes.

As Donald Savoie perceptively notes in *Visiting Grandchildren: Economic Development in the Maritimes*, "In economic development, as in other things, history matters, and success breeds success much as failure breeds failure" (18). Savoie's emphasis on history and the need for examples of positive economic outcomes suggests why the story of the Bricklin is, perhaps perversely, so popular with audiences, even as a cautionary tale. The appeal for Hatfield of Bricklin's proposed car manufacturing business, which had already been rejected by the Quebec government, was precisely that it would counter what the premier perceived of as "Ottawa's [increasing] centralism," or what Richard Starr describes as "a century of post-Confederation bankers, federal politicians and bureaucrats who wanted to concentrate all manufacturing in Ontario and Quebec" (89).

In an effort to escape "the boom and bust of a resource based economy" (Starr 89), Hatfield strategically turned to manufacturing opportunities that would stabilize the province's economy, though with Bricklin, the warning signs of failure were disguised by the seductive nature of the car itself, a gull-winged beauty that enabled Hatfield to assert on the day production was scheduled to begin in Saint John, "We are not just building a better car. We are building a better New Brunswick" (Fredericks 51). Hatfield even asserted that the Bricklin would become "a symbol of what New Brunswick and its people can do" (51). Paradoxically, then, the musical becomes an ironically charged tribute to the aspirations of both Hatfield and his American partner. Bricklin, as portrayed in the musical, brings his south-of-the-border optimism and larger-than-life personality to New Brunswick, looking for a naive investor on Canadian—and specifically Atlantic Canadian—soil after being rejected by Quebec.

The Bricklin itself is sold to audiences in similar terms, but with the promise of a new and more positive ending to the story of the now forty-year-old failed manufacturing venture. For many Canadians, the Bricklin has served as a historical example of regional naïveté and a justification for limiting subsidies to struggling economies, especially in Atlantic Canada. However, the musical takes the disaster of the Bricklin and finds a way to convey the energy and excitement of the era, creating a production that is vicariously nostalgic and potentially redemptive for audience members—even those who may want to judge Hatfield's and Bricklin's actions harshly.

Playhouse Executive Director Tim Yerxa and Theatre New Brunswick Artistic Director Caleb Marshall describe *The Bricklin* as “a wild ride...a dream to make something for, by, and about this province...[and] a celebration of those who dare to dream” (Yerxa and Marshall 3). And it does so strategically by focusing on the significance of place. *The Bricklin* securely situates itself in Fredericton in the Playhouse, located directly across the street from the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel, where Hatfield lived, ate, and drank for much of his career as premier. The Playhouse is also kitty-corner from the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, where, in the musical, Hatfield regularly retreats to contemplate his next political move in front of the famous and vast (nearly fifteen-feet-high) Dali portrait, titled *Santiago El Grande*.

The Dali painting depicts the Spanish saint, James, on horseback, looking toward Jesus and promising man’s ascent to heaven. It was one of several donated to the Beaverbrook by the New Brunswick-born financier and industrial tycoon, Sir James Dunn. Dunn himself was well aware of the changing fortunes of New Brunswick. He himself rose from a life of poverty brought on by the collapse of his father’s shipbuilding company, a key part of the region’s economy that began to falter with the 1870s’ shift to nation-based rail travel. The painting also figured heavily in playwright Allen Cole’s teenage recollections of Fredericton, offering what Yerxa has described as a link between the “surrealism” of Dali’s grandiose and dreamy vision of the promise of victory in *Santiago El Grande* and the “surrealist” elements of musical theatre, which include characters bursting into song to reveal their most intimate thoughts on stage (February 24, 2013).⁶

Symbolically, then, the inclusion of and emphasis on this portrait throughout *The Bricklin*, with its vivid representation of Christ’s resurrection and its testament to his piety as he travels toward heaven, a place usually reserved for the dead, can be read as a sign that the New Brunswick economy, too, can find ways to remake itself by attending to the specificities of place. And by foregrounding the Dali painting, the musical suggests that recognizing the value of culture and investing in it is key to this refashioning of self. Indeed, when the fictional Malcolm Bricklin has a clandestine meeting with Hatfield in front of the massive canvas to ask for more money from the New Brunswick government, he is inspired by Dali’s magnificent depiction of a horse, telling Hatfield it would make “a hell of a hood ornament” (Ledoux and Cole 26). Such commercialization also recalls and reconfigures New Brunswick’s historical prosperity in the transportation business, translated into a new form: the sports car.

Yet the painting’s layered symbolism also functions in the musical as reminder that dreaming may be risky, at least on stage, but can be profitable in real life. As with Jim Gilbert’s *Wheels & Deals*, cultivating the association with the musical became a clever opportunity for the Beaverbrook Art Gallery to cross-promote the cultural richness of Fredericton and garner advertising space. Colour postcards with the image of Santiago El Grande on one side, and the promise of a free second admission to the gallery with the purchase of a single adult admission, were inserted in programs to explicitly draw attention to the physical presence and close proximity of this major work of art for theatregoers. In addition, the gallery partnered with the Playhouse to host the reception for Malcolm Bricklin’s visit at the beginning of the musical’s second summer run in 2011, which was arranged to highlight the presence of the Dali painting and its proximity to the theatre.

The play’s strong commitment to place and to capturing a moment in New Brunswick’s history—which is visibly reinforced just beyond the theatre’s doors as audiences leave after the

show—is countered by the playwrights’ (and particularly the composer’s) decision to use the disco era to frame the production as a whole, from sets and costumes to the powder-blue tuxedoed Acrylix, the musicians who are on stage for much of the show. Disco as a movement began in New York City, and came out of what Peter Shapiro has described as “the dark underground of a society teetering on the brink” (13). Disco offered a “caste-destroying social aesthetic” by promising entry to a world of decadence that was not confined to wealthy and famous nightclub goers but also embraced sexual and racial difference (13). The result was that disco embodied the conflicts of the era, particularly for Americans in the midst of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the ongoing legacy of the Civil Rights and feminist movements. It reflected a “turbulent time” (Moore A4), perhaps more so beyond the borders of New Brunswick than in the province itself. However, the fact that Hatfield frequented “the Club Cosmopolitan” (Cormier and Michaud 47), a Fredericton disco bar, from the time he first became premier suggests that there was a local awareness of this movement, if only peripherally.

Bricklin director Alisa Palmer comments in a conversation with the *Globe and Mail* that “it took about 10 years for all this [disco] to hit New Brunswick” (Moore A4). Filmmaker Christian LeBlanc, who in 2005 wrote and directed a fantastical French-language documentary funded by Telefilm Canada about Malcolm Bricklin’s relationship to the province, echoes the disconnect between the spirit of disco and 1970s’ New Brunswick, stating that Bricklin’s arrival in Fredericton was “like an alien had landed...in this conservative little corner of the country” (Moore A4).

But the musical and Hatfield’s biographers suggest otherwise, as they situate the relationship of Bricklin and Hatfield in a disco context that foregrounds the premier’s efforts to alter the province’s vision of itself in a playful and sensual manner, intended to—in turn—seduce contemporary theatregoers while giving them a visible and aural distance from the events of the past that might otherwise be less palatable. Remarkably, the show’s co-playwright and composer, Allen Cole, even offers an anecdote in the program notes that attests to the relative marginality of disco in Fredericton as late as 1980, recalling that he attended an “anti-disco rally” as a teen outside a downtown movie theatre in the capital city. But Cole notes that he has since learned his lesson by “immersing myself in the disco and funk music of that time, as research for writing and composing *The Bricklin*” (6). He concludes, “Disco may have lost the battle that night in Fredericton, but thirty years later—it’s won the war” (6). By injecting the narrative of *The Bricklin* with a sensibility that “really gets down into your pants,” as Palmer puts it (Moore A4), the musical offers an ironically charged but viscerally appealing account of the financial failure of this cross-border partnership by replicating Malcolm Bricklin’s seductive promise of a dream that, although it may not yield economic success for New Brunswickers, does become a testament to and justification of the need to dream—and dream big.

As the opening scenes of *The Bricklin* attest, Hatfield, the “Classy Canuck,” is trying to find a way to “shift...[New Brunswickers] into the groove” (Ledoux and Cole 8). But he finds himself drifting without purpose until the bell-bottom-suited, cowboy-boot-wearing American entrepreneur Malcolm Bricklin enters his office. Bricklin entices the elegantly attired premier with a sports car that represents, in his words, “Freedom. Glamour. Adventure! And for some the first truly great sexual experience of their lives” (9). While Hatfield initially treats the car’s gull-wing doors as symbolizing that he—like the figure in Dali’s painting—will ascend to the heavens, he quickly acquiesces to Malcolm’s promise that the car embodies the “high risk venture” that he seeks to “put this province on the map” (11). For Hatfield, Malcolm is the ultimate car salesman who embodies “the Great

American Way” by, as Bricklin puts it, fulfilling the needs of buyers. In a later duet with a Saint John radio reporter, titled “The Entrepreneur,” Malcolm asserts that “Our cities would all be ghost towns / Our cupboards would all be bare / If it weren’t for folks like me / Sellin’ hard to the folks out there” (19).

The self-construction is especially ironic given that, when Bricklin approached Hatfield, he was already facing several lawsuits in the U.S. for defrauding franchisees and thus was forced to seek funding north of the border. Moreover, in the musical, when the two men leave Hatfield’s office to celebrate the new partnership with a drink, Hatfield recalls the vodka martinis at the Copacabana in New York City, a place Bricklin is unfamiliar with but Disco Dick knows all too well. He tells the brash car salesman, “Copacabana! New York City! Me and Truman go all the time!” (12). This is a nod both to the disco era’s willingness to embrace sexual diversity (epitomized by Hatfield’s friendship with the openly gay writer, Truman Capote) and to the paradox of the sophisticated, cosmopolitan Hatfield who remains blinded by his dream that New Brunswick can become a manufacturing powerhouse.

In the musical, Hatfield’s worldliness is pointedly juxtaposed with the economic and social realities of Anglophones Gerrard and Michelle, a working-class couple living in the rural New Brunswick town of Minto. They are struggling to make a decent living on unemployment insurance and part-time work. The musical captures the challenges this couple faces in the form of a catchy duet, which pairs Michelle’s desire to escape a place “we’re always going to be defeated [by]” with Gerrard’s insistence that they remain in “Minto—a place that’s bred in your bones” (Ledoux and Cole 15). Luckily, the couple quickly finds common ground when they open the local newspaper and discover an ad for the soon-to-be-opened Bricklin plant in their hometown. In keeping with the musical’s subtitle, “an automotive fantasy,” Gerrard is seduced by the newspaper picture of the car, telling Michelle, “Look at those doors! Oh baby...this could be the start of something big!” (17). His utterance anticipates the couple’s mutual participation in Bricklin’s disco-infused dream, with Gerrard working as a production manager at the factory and Michelle eventually becoming a model in Bricklin advertisements. The script showcases the ways in which the car both changes the lives of these working-class rural individuals and distracts them from the reality of their relationship. One of the highlights of the musical is when Gerrard figuratively makes love to the Bricklin on stage, singing a tune of seduction titled “Spark Plugs” (24) as he lays his body across the front of the car and eventually lights a post-coital cigarette, while Michelle waits at home for his arrival, lamenting his cheating ways when she finds “oil on his collar and the smell of gasoline” (30). While both find temporary economic prosperity through the creation of the Bricklin, the cost of that dream eventually becomes too high.

Taking revenge on Gerrard’s devotion to a new vehicle, Michelle accepts Malcolm Bricklin’s offer, made at Hatfield’s election-night party at the Beaverbrook Hotel, to travel the U.S. car-show circuit and experience big city life, including relocating to the city of Saint John. But Michelle soon finds herself endlessly selling her body and the car across the United States in order to keep Bricklin’s fantasy alive, despite her insider knowledge that production is behind schedule and heavily over budget, and that the car itself is a lemon. The disco beat of her musical efforts to seduce potential franchisees, which is cold, hard, and empty, relies explicitly on the promise of sex, drugs, and dancing with Michelle as the trophy. As Bricklin tells car-show attendees, “You ain’t ever done The Hustle till you’ve hustled with Michelle. Ain’t that right baby?” (52).

The promise of urban adventure, then, may initially appeal to Michelle, but she soon reveals that her post-performance daily life consists of “park[ing] my butt on the bed and turn[ing] on the TV / They got twenty-five stations but they ain’t got CBC” (53). Even her short-lived elation over the chance to escape incessant reruns of “Hawaii Five-O,” a syndicated American show that was a favourite of hers when living in Minto, fades as she conveys her increased feelings of isolation from the familiar comforts of her previous small-town existence. Michelle recognizes, as her signature solo attests, that “dreams are like taffy,” but can turn brittle and shatter, much like the Bricklin cars whose shells were made of an acrylic sheet bonded to a fibreglass panel, making them durable but liable to crack and flame (5).⁷ Michelle’s song exposes the alienating nature of her experience selling cars across the United States, far from her roots. Desperate to recover what she has lost, she longs for “Min-noe” (50), the small pond of her hometown and residence of her former boyfriend, Gerrard, who in a duet with the Acrylix, also laments Michelle’s departure with the lines, “Where’s my baby now?” (54). Like Michelle, Gerrard realizes that his dreams mean nothing without her presence in his life.

As the musical progresses, Hatfield conveys his fear of the Bricklin’s failure by quoting now-famous lines written by New Brunswick poet and real-life friend Alden Nowlan—“Strangers are conversing excitedly as they do during disasters” (21)—to Malcolm Bricklin. Yet the two men remain seduced by the car’s promise that it will fulfill what both characters describe as “Crazy Dreams” (27). Hatfield even engages in a pep talk with the imaginary figure of Salvador Dali to get guidance on how to proceed as the Bricklin continues to consume provincial money without any evidence of future profitability. Dali’s tendency to commercialize products, as Hatfield explains to Bricklin, “did quite a bit of damage to his reputation as the pre-eminent surrealist” (27). Yet, like Dali, Hatfield and Bricklin remain committed to “painting the landscape of dreams” regardless of the financial cost (27). And the car’s prominence in Hatfield’s re-election is visibly replicated on stage as an angry mob of anti-Hatfield protesters at a campaign rally are mesmerized into silence by the approach of the Bricklin. The car is “so beautiful,” in the words of the protesters, it “takes your breath away” (33).

The Bricklin secures Hatfield’s successful re-election in November 1974, which he celebrates with a disco party at the Lord Beaverbrook Hotel (33). During the party, Hatfield and Michelle meet and in a brief exchange reflect once again on the centrality of dreams to the province. Michelle soberly asserts that “sometimes dreams don’t turn out the way you imagined,” to which Hatfield replies, borrowing Salvador Dali’s words, “Only dreams can save you” (38). This moment prompts Michelle’s short-lived pursuit of the job with Malcolm and sustains Hatfield’s insistence on clinging to the promise of the gull-winged car.

But the dream must come to an end. In *The Bricklin*, Hatfield is forced by the opposition Liberals to conduct an independent audit of Bricklin Canada Limited because of leaked information that he gave additional funds to the company during the election campaign without telling voters, a turn of events that reflected real-life circumstances. The Premier is soon confronted with enormous financial losses and the realization that Malcolm’s car cannot deliver what Disco Dick covets: sustained economic prosperity. When Hatfield eventually, as he puts it, pulls “the plug! / For the sake of / My dear New Brunswick” (64), he literally weighs the danger of dreaming all the time—which leads to craziness—with the need that Malcolm perpetuates to the bitter end, that without dreaming, craziness will ensue.

The Bricklin's ensemble finale brings together Michelle and Gerrard, who in an ironic twist of fate have decided to move to the predominantly Francophone northern New Brunswick town of Edmundston to start a new life together. The musical's conclusion parodically marks their reconciliation as they dance the New York–originated Hustle, along with Malcolm who is still hustling Hatfield for money to fund a new venture, as the group sings the closing number, aptly titled “It's Been a Hell of a Ride” (69).

The playwrights' choice of Edmundston as the next destination for these working-class New Brunswickers in search of a better life is prescient. Edmundston in the 1970s was a seemingly prosperous industrial town, dominated by the Fraser–owned pulp mill, which offered high paying, secure unionized jobs for labourers and represented the success of a Canadian-American partnership. During this period, a “high–pressure steam pipeline” approximately a mile in length was built to connect the Edmundston mill with its American counterpart across the St. John River, transporting liquefied pulp to be processed into fine-grade papers (Twin Rivers). This border-crossing pipeline speeded up the transportation and production process, despite the fact that from the post–World War II era onward, industry demand was decreasing. By the time *The Bricklin* debuted in 2010, the pulp and paper industry in New Brunswick had been decimated by the “collision of postindustrialism and globalization” (Tremblay, “Response” 338). Fraser Papers, the company that built, owned, and operated the Edmundston pulp plant, filed for bankruptcy protection in 2009, having already received in 2007 a multi-million-dollar bailout from the New Brunswick government aimed at preserving jobs in Edmundston.

The results were devastating for the local economy. Pensioners saw substantial amounts of their income disappear because of the bankruptcy and there was a swift out-migration by former employees. When Fraser Papers emerged in 2010 under a new name—Twin Rivers—and with a new financial backer, the mill appeared to be on more stable footing but only with significant federal and provincial government subsidies. However, early in 2012, Brookfield Asset Corporation, which handled the restructuring of the mills on both sides of the New Brunswick–Maine border, announced that they were looking to sell their 51% stake in these companies, which were no longer seen to be a good long-term investment.

Given this contemporary context, Anglophone Gerrard and Michelle's excitement at the promise of jobs and a better life in northern New Brunswick sustains the musical's participation in actively narrating the province's cultural identity, and thus reshaping the neoliberal agenda of the New Brunswick government. For those audience members with insider knowledge of the province and its history, the couple's decision to move to Edmundston playfully draws attention to both the still-vexed political relationships between English- and French-speaking populations within the province and meta-textually highlights the challenges of relying on a resource-based economy to sustain economic renewal (which has plagued much of New Brunswick since Confederation). Ultimately, the musical sidesteps the internal divisions that remain between French- and English-speaking populations in the province—perhaps because of its creation in English and the physical location of its production in the predominantly Anglophone city of Fredericton, where the show is aimed at English-speaking locals and tourists visiting from outside the province.

As *The Bricklin* concludes, Richard Hatfield has taken his disco dreams in a new direction with the building of Point Lepreau, a nuclear energy facility located near Saint John that, like the Bricklin car, ultimately cost New Brunswickers far more than anticipated, and in recent years has

proven to be a colossal drain on the provincial economy as it undergoes substantial refurbishment. As with the Bricklin, Lepreau seemed to offer salvation for the province's coffers by exporting power to New England. Indeed, in performances of the musical, the mention of Lepreau immediately stirs laughter from audience members familiar with the power plant debacle. Audience members know that the power plant, like the pulp and paper industry, echoes the Bricklin phenomenon. They also know of the links between the Hatfield era and the more contemporary efforts of Premiers Bernard Lord and Shawn Graham to create energy mega-projects that promised to wipe out much of the province's debt by selling access to or ownership of New Brunswick's natural resources. (*The Bricklin* was produced in the wake of Graham's defeat, which was tied to his failure to win provincial support for a deal to sell NB Power to the Quebec government.) Given this immediate political context, the musical becomes a playfully humorous but also powerfully pointed critique of the dangers of dreaming (both American- and New Brunswick-style), even as it indulges the cast, crew, and audience members in an escapist fantasy where dreams can potentially, if only temporarily, come true.

The love narrative of Gerrard and Michelle is especially telling in this regard. Having travelled extensively for work and having sought the glamorous life, Michelle is relieved and delighted to be back in New Brunswick, choosing to keep her search for urban adventure confined to the province even if jobs remain difficult to find. Likewise, Gerrard has exchanged his love object for a living, breathing woman. And Hatfield, in spite of his worldliness, is revealed once again to be a disco-dreamer, a visionary who recognizes the limits of dreaming but cannot help himself. Like a phoenix from the ashes (or the Bricklin's gull-wing doors, now coveted by car collectors despite their mechanical problems), the success of the musical, and its potential attractiveness as a tourist draw, reframes provincial dreaming in a new light by capitalizing on a shared vision to achieve—at least this time—a sustainable and entertaining end.

In a final twist on this musical exploration of self-sufficiency, the Fredericton Playhouse announced in March 2013 that rights to perform *The Bricklin* had been granted to the Old Timers Garage Theatre and Musical Club in Katowice, Poland. Titled "Disco Dick Makes His Debut Overseas," the web posting explained that the theatre where the Polish-language version of *The Bricklin* would be performed was, in fact, the creation of a private car collector in Katowice (Fredericton Playhouse). The theatre/garage, which houses "Old Cadillacs, a model T-Ford, a rare Russian ZiL, and even a Delorean," serves as a community space, hosting musical events several nights per week along with theatre and "poetry readings" (Fredericton Playhouse). The posting includes a black-and-white photo of the performance space—with vintage cars abutting the audience seating—that attests to the authenticity of the venue and its ability to capture the love of automobiles that is so central to the musical.

But the announcement also carefully crafts a vision of a community that possesses the cultural sophistication to appreciate rock music and poetry in equal measure (a necessity given Hatfield's quotation of Nowlan and his passion for Dali who was the master of commercializing high art for profit). While Katowice is a massive urban metropolis with a population in excess of three million, its economic roots in coal mining and heavy industry and its recent shift toward small business echo Fredericton's own efforts to attain self-sufficiency in new ways. However, the exportation of *The Bricklin* also suggests that the return to an emphasis on place can be coupled, quite confidently, with an ability to export New Brunswick products around the globe. In this instance, seizing collaborative opportunities may not provide large direct economic benefits to the citizens of New Brunswick, but it

does set a pattern of cultural exportation that rather than destroying the local, celebrates it and insists upon its shared relevance to communities around the globe. *The Bricklin: An Automotive Fantasy* thus becomes a model of local and provincial self-sufficiency that employs nostalgia and historical economic failure to create a potentially brighter future.

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Endnotes

¹ I am grateful to the Executive Director of the Fredericton Playhouse, Tim Yerxa, for facilitating my research and writing of this article by granting access to the script and the Playhouse archival holdings and for speaking with me on several occasions.

² See for example, Ivison's examination of Coady's *Saints of Big Harbour* and Marshall's analysis of Moore's short fiction. Both readings stress a rethinking of Atlantic regionalism and its anti-modern fetishization, particularly by the rest of Canada.

³ See Reid 466–71.

⁴ See <http://fredplayhouse.wordpress.com/2011/06/15/the-bricklin-backstage-part-1-bricklin-wheels-and-deals/> for Jeremy VanSlyke's podcast interview with Jim Gilbert, the owner of Jim Glibert's Wheels & Deals, about Gilbert's search for, acquisition of, and care of the Bricklin used in the musical.

⁵ See Savoie 25.

⁶ The concept of "surrealism" is used very broadly by Yerxa to refer to what is fantastical, improbable, and thus out of the ordinary, whether in art or theatrical performance. See King for

focused discussion of how *Santiago El Grande* conforms with and subverts surrealist tenets. It is worth noting that by 1939 Dali had been expelled from the Paris surrealist group because of his “refusal to take sides during the Spanish Civil War” and his increasing tendency to parody the revolutionary aspects of surrealism in his paintings (194).

⁷ See Fredericks (3) for details on the body components of the Bricklin.