

## FROM GÉLINAS TO CARRIER: CRITICAL RESPONSE TO TRANSLATED QUEBEC THEATRE IN TORONTO

*Jane Koustas*

In a recent article in which he considers critical response to translated French-Canadian theatre in Toronto from January 1986 to November 1988, Robert Wallace identifies and analyzes attitudes prevalent in theatre critics' evaluations of these productions (Wallace 1990). While enthusiastic about the popularity of French-Canadian theatre which has become "a staple of the Toronto season" (216), Wallace argues that efforts to bridge the cultural gap have sometimes been sabotaged because of a failure to acknowledge, accept and account for cultural differences as a part of transferring theatre from one culture to another (216). This has sometimes rendered "wrong-headed" (217) English Canadian productions of French-Canadian plays as well as a critical response that somewhat ignores "where a play is coming from"; Toronto reviewers exhibit a Toronto-centred attitude that brings into question the fairness of their reviews. He states:

Indeed my general concern with the reception of Québécois plays in Toronto originates with my discomfort over the attitudes with which they often appear to be approached, not just by the critics who review them but also by the companies that produce them. In a word, I would typify these attitudes as Toronto-centric, adding to the historical complaint . . . that Toronto's artistic institutions suffer from an arrogance that leads them to either appropriate or dismiss whatever appears to them as genuinely different. (220)

Wallace recommends that critics, as well as all those attending and involved in the production, avail themselves of a knowledge of place in order to "understand it's [the play's] context of time and place" (218). Wallace also suggests that critics recognize the

importance of the mediation of translation and the "degree to which the translation alters the original and creates, in a sense, a new play" (221).

This article will examine the critical response to translated Quebec theatre in Toronto from 1951 to 1982 while recognizing, as does Wallace, that reviews are the "the subjective reactions of individuals whose perceptions are often not shared by others" (217). Indeed this study frequently considers the divergent response provided by the daily press as well as by other sources. While not proposing to thoroughly analyze the successes and failure of translated Quebec theatre in Toronto, this article will attempt to determine general trends. In the light of Wallace's study, particular attention will be paid to the critical response to the question of place as well as to the importance attributed to the translation and translator.

The present study suggests that up until the arrival of theatre resulting from the Quiet Revolution or Nouveau Théâtre Québécois introduced by Jean-Claude Germain, Jean Barbeau and Michel Tremblay, Toronto critics illustrated sensitivity, though one could argue somewhat patronizingly, to the question of place; productions were identified as being "Quebec" plays and some attention was paid to the play's social and historical context. With the introduction of "joual", which posed more complex translation problems, and of the social and political issues associated with the Nouveau Théâtre québécois, which demanded greater understanding of a radically different "place" as well as of different theatre practices resulting in part from the collective theatre experience (see Wallace 1988 and Leonard), critical response was less sympathetic towards plays' "québécoisité" or Quebeckness; indeed a play's "québécoisité" seemed to work against it as it rendered it too remote for the Toronto audience. Furthermore, it will be argued that Michel Tremblay succeeded in Toronto as a Canadian, not Quebec, playwright due primarily to the universality, not québécoisité, of his plays. This confirms Wallace's observation that Toronto theatre critics sometimes dismiss or appropriate theatre that is culturally different.

When describing Toronto's warm reception of Gratien Gélinas' *Tit-Coq* (Royal Alexandra Theatre, Jan. 8-13, Mar. 12-17, Apr. 9-14, 1951), Herbert Whittaker observed that the Toronto public "indicated its appreciation of the significance of this

theatrical opening" (*Globe and Mail*, Jan. 8, 1951). Toronto did indeed "throw out the red carpet" (J. Karr, *Star*, Jan. 9, 1951) to Gélinas and his production of *Tit-Coq*, performed in English by the original Quebec cast. Gélinas, author/director/star, was honoured with a doctorate and the sensational opening night concluded with "one of the most gala events of the winter season" (*Globe and Mail*, Jan. 9, 1951). "A theatrical event about as rare as a blizzard in July" (J. Karr, *Toronto Star*, Jan. 9, 1951), which attracted a capacity audience, and "an evening full of excitement" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 9, 1951), the opening was a resounding success. However, the play itself, described as "an unpretentious effort, an earnest, straightforward even naive drama" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Apr. 10, 1951) and "not a particularly great play" (J. Karr, *Star*, Jan. 9, 1951) did not receive as much attention as Gélinas himself, "an actor of unusual personality and talent" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 9, 1951) suggesting, as does Paul Leonard, that English Canadian critics tend to valorize the playwright as the primary authority in theatrical practice (Leonard 6).

The drama, written by a man who "understands *his* (my emphasis) people well" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan 9, 1951) was seen as essentially regional, "wrenched out of the soil of Quebec" by H. Whittaker who pointed out the importance of the Catholic setting (*Globe and Mail*, Jan. 9, 1951). For Jack Karr, the storyline of the "down-to-earth piece of homespun" was drawn from "the same tearful source used by soap-opera writers" (*Star*, Jan. 9, 1951). The play was performed in English by the original cast thus producing "crude, picturesque accents" which "suited the tale well" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 9, 1951) but which were "at times very difficult to tune into" (J. Karr, *Star*, Jan. 9, 1951). No mention was made of the translator or of the translation.

Toronto's welcome of Marcel Dubé's *The Time of the Lilacs* (Royal Alexandra, Oct. 28-Nov.1, 1958) was far less sensational. Described as "gently sentimental" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Oct. 28, 1958), the play received only a neutral review. Attention was drawn to Ken Johnstone's "questionable translation" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Oct. 28, 1958) but no explanation of why it was questionable nor of how this affected the play was given.

Gélinas' *Bousille and the Just* (Royal Alexandra, Jan. 16-20, 1962) staged in both English and French (*Bousille et les Justes*, Royal Alexandra, Jan. 15, 1962), fared well with the critics though the length of the run does not suggest a great box office success. Once again, in another "memorable creation" Gélinas, "the most honoured man in Canadian theatre" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1962) received more praise than the play itself. It was described as "a melodrama that takes a cold look at hypocrisy as it flourishes in [his] native Quebec" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1962) and "an awkwardly constructed, ineptly staged and performed melodrama" (Nathan Cohen, *Star*, Jan. 16, 1962). Attention was once again drawn to the play's Quebec, or French-Canadian, origin and subject matter though Gélinas was praised as well for his command of the common touch: "to have it means that you instinctively ring chords of mutual identification in a mass audience" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Jan. 16, 1962). It was performed by the original cast whose accents, though high-pitched and "lacking in shading", added "authenticity to the original" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1962). Only one critic commented on the "stilted and somewhat antiquated translation" while omitting the translator's name. He added that the "things that make the play worthwhile can only be effective in their native tongue and idiom" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Jan. 16, 1962) but did not specify what these "things" were nor how the translator failed to convey them.

Jacques Languirand made his Toronto debut with *The Partition* and *Departures* (Central Library Theatre, from Feb. 17, 1966) and received mixed reviews. Comparing Languirand's work to the author himself, H. Whittaker described both as "humorous and unexpected" (*Globe and Mail*, Feb. 17, 1966). *The Departures*, "a blithe tragedy without answers" (*Globe and Mail*, Feb. 18, 1966) was the more successful. Though "far more satisfying and complex (Ronald Evans, *Telegram*, Feb. 8, 1966) than *Partitions*, "a poorly translated, two finger exercise" (no mention of the translator nor of Languirand's Quebec origins) (R. Evans, *Telegram*, Feb. 8, 1966), *Departures* was nevertheless described as a "textually skimpy and frustratingly swift" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Feb. 18, 1966) drama by a "Montreal dramatist" (Cohen, Whittaker) whose approach was "partly scornful, partly sympathetic and romantic in a specifically French-Canadian intellectual way" (N. Cohen, *Star*,

Feb. 18, 1966). The critic did not explain what was specifically French-Canadian nor how it differed from an English-Canadian approach. The translator's name was not indicated.

Languirand's return to Toronto was preceded by Jean Basiles's *The Drummer Boy* (Royal Alexandra Theatre, Jan 17-Feb. 4, 1968), a chronicle of Old Quebec (*Globe and Mail*, Jan. 18, 1968) staged for Theatre Toronto's debut. H. Whittaker lauded this contribution that was at once "national, bicultural and local" and its "probing into the origins of one of Canada's founding nations" seemed to be a definite merit (*Globe and Mail*, Jan. 18, 1968). Though praised for its "first rate beat" (G. Hacklin, *Telegram*, Jan. 18, 1968) and its "powerful tune" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 18, 1968), it was also condemned as "an insult" (McKenzie Porter, *Telegram*, Jan. 22, 1968). The debate stemmed from its controversial and sensitive subject, namely the story of the rape of an eleven year old girl and the abuse of the young, accused soldier in Old Quebec. The latter critic's response was clearly coloured by his own difficulty in dealing with what he identified as the "continuing obsession of people in show business with homosexuality" (*Telegram*, Jan. 22, 1968). The production was both acclaimed as "a significant debut [for Theatre Toronto] (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 18, 1968) and condemned as "spluttering jumble, a French language Canadian interpretation of Billy Budd" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Jan. 18, 1968) as well as an "inauspicious start for the theatre company (M. Porter, *Telegram*, Jan. 18, 1968). Only one mention was made of the translator, Jeremy Brooks: it was suggested that something "was lost in the translation" in this "occasionally jarring English version" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 18, 1968). All the critics researched noted the historical setting without necessarily explaining its importance in the play, but N. Cohen deplored the failure of this to translate into anything that was "specifically French-Catholic and American in the performance" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Jan. 18, 1968).

For its grand opening the St. Lawrence Centre Repertoire Theatre Company chose Jacques Languirand's *Man Inc.* (St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, from Feb. 16, 1970). Billed as a mixed media show, the production, "a tremendously complicated combination of music, dance film, and live actors" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 27, 1970) received more attention for its technical dazzle than for its content. According to some critics, the

dialogue which was "flatulent and incomprehensible" (Jim McPherson, Feb. 26, 1970), without "a fresh word" (Kenneth Winters, *Telegram*, Mar. 10, 1970) and "low in content" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 27, 1970), was somewhat offset by the "big, dazzling showing off of the latest techniques of total theatre" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 27, 1970) or by the score described as "a genuine imaginative achievement" (K. Winters, *Telegram*, Mar. 10, 1970). For others however this experimenting with modern dance and "noises" (J. McPherson, Feb. 26, 1970) could not lift the production beyond a "numbing anthology of platitudes, dramatically, musically and choreographically" (N. Cohen, *Star*, Feb. 22, 1970). Only the latter critic noted that the play was translated by Mavor Moore.

Jean-Claude Germain's introduction to Toronto with *Notes from Quebec* (Theatre Passe Muraille, from May 7, 1970) was Toronto's first experience with "joul" in translation and with a new type of Quebec theatre which spoke of a different, post Quiet Revolution Quebec. It was, according to the critics, unsuccessful. It was described as "an absurdist soap opera" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 8, 1970) which while "often interesting and occasionally funny" (Don Rubin, *Star*, May 8, 1970), remained "sophmoric and amateurish" (D. Rubin, *Star*, May 8, 1970). While condemned for these reasons, the play's "québécoitude" also worked against it: it was judged to have lost "some pertinence in the translation" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 8, 1970) and to have lost impact in its uprooting from Quebec to Toronto (D. Rubin, *Star*, May 8, 1970). It was thus "over the head" of at least one critic who was also offended by Germain's, or the translator's, use of four letter words (DuBary Campeau, *Telegram*, May 8, 1970). The translator's name was not mentioned.

The negative reaction elicited by a play's québécoitude as well as by the use of "joul" was even more evident in Jean Barbeau's Toronto experience. Critics saw in the production of Jean Barbeau's *Manon Lastcall* and *The Way of Lacross* (W.W. Theatre Productions, Poor Alex, May 1-27, 1972) "one hit, one miss" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 12, 1972). *Manon Lastcall* was little more than "a tiresome farce" (U. Kareda, *Star*, May 12, 1972) that "misfired" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 12, 1972). However *The Way of Lacross*, though "not an entirely successful play" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 12, 1972), did illustrate

Barbeau's "positive grip on dramatic craftsmanship" (U. Kareda, *Star*, May 12, 1972). It was also pointed out that "the play suffer[ed] from being aimed specifically at a Quebec audience" (Grace Richardson) thus rendering the social criticism irrelevant. The jokes on Parisian and Quebec French for example did not "come across" (G. Richardson). More importantly, the critics, and according to them, the audience, was particularly unsympathetic or insensitive to the play's political message: Lacross's final outburst "fell flat" (G. Richardson). Searching for the reasons for Lacross's arrest, and apparently unaware that the play was based on the actual arraignment of a political demonstrator, H. Whittaker commented that the "play's accusatory drive [was] weakened" (*Globe and Mail*, May 12, 1972). While noting the play's use of "a quality closely identified with Quebec's separatist pangs," Whittaker, like other critics failed to acknowledge or explain the importance of the political background namely the October Crisis. Urjo Kareda was more sensitive to both the linguistic and cultural problems involved in transporting this new type of theatre and to the Toronto audience's difficulty in understanding or appreciating it. He pointed out the importance of "the sound of language (see Wallace 1988, 9 and Leonard) stating that "Barbeau uses words with exceptional muscularity and vigour." He noted as well the importance of "use of words that contain other words much as social structures contain other social structures" and the failure of the translation, "safe, self-deprecating and listless" to convey this. Kareda further commented on the difference between the French and English versions, which ran at the same time, noting that the latter suffered because of the "wilful obliteration of the ceremonial [religious] nature of the play", dropped because it could have proved "too remote" for the Toronto audience. Kareda recognized as well the importance of cultural difference or the question of place in Barbeau's work and that translating and transposing such plays could prove to be "a troublesome point."

Particularly unappreciative of both Barbeau plays were the mothers of the elementary school children who, through some total miscalculation of WASP sensibilities, had been given free tickets. The students may have happily snickered through the performance but the mothers, "enraged over obscene language and scenes" stormed out claiming, "those people should be put in

a mental institution for putting on something like that" (Robert MacDonald, *Sun*, Apr. 8, 1972).

Michel Tremblay's tremendous success in Toronto, due in part to the efforts of Bill Glassco and John Van Burek, has been the subject of numerous studies. Toronto critics recognized in Tremblay "a writer of apparent power and tremendous drive" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 15, 1972) at the opening of *Forever Yours Marie-Lou* (Tarragon Theatre, Nov. 14-Dec. 10, 1972). The enthusiasm was not however unanimous. Described as "a fascinating play" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Nov. 15, 1972) it was also judged to be "repetitious and outdated" offering only some "familiar novelty" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 15, 1972). The reaction to the translation was also mixed. Described as "splendid" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Nov. 15, 1972), it was also blamed for the play's loss of impact (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 15, 1972). However in spite of the critics' somewhat mixed reaction, the attendance figure of 80% indicates that this production did indeed set the stage for Tremblay's future successes. Paula Dancy affirms, "Tarragon had shown that there was, in Toronto, an audience for Tremblay" (Dancy 27).

*Marie-Lou's* return to Toronto (Theatre Plus, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, June 4-21, 1975) was described as a "riveting performance" (George Anthony, *Sun*, Apr. 6, 1975) in which the director made "the most of the playwright's work" (Joseph Erdelyi, *Ottawa Citizen*, Apr. 6, 1975). The unanimously positive reaction to the text suggests indeed that the Toronto audience had "had more of an opportunity to study his [Tremblay's] style enabling it to spot the surging currents beneath the dazzling movement of the actor stream" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, June 5, 1975). U. Kareda, while maintaining his high opinion of the "beautifully controlled and constructed" play (*Star*, June 5, 1975), found that Theatre Plus had made "a minus of Tremblay".

The play succeeded however in spite of, not because of, its Quebec origins. The product of a "church-ridden state", the play was deemed to have lost some "courage" either through "transplant or translation" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, 1975). However while being simultaneously "personal, regional and universal" (H. Whittaker), the play could "flourish without a political analysis" (U. Kareda, *Star*, May 15, 1972) and could "reach beyond its point of origin" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*,

1972). The *Star* critic further downplayed the importance of the play's and Tremblay's Quebec origins by stating, "Tremblay himself would say that he is a Quebec playwright, not Canadian, but never mind" (U. Kareda, *Star*, June 15, 1975).

Anne Hébert's *Le Temps sauvage* (University Alumnae Dramatic Productions, Firehall Theatre, Nov. 23- Dec. 9, 1972) was compared to Tremblay's play staged only ten days earlier and was described as another "symbolic analysis of Quebec's problems seen dramatically in terms of family contact" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Nov. 27, 1972). The text, though of "undeniable interest," lacked "style and vigour" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24, 1972) and needed "more shape" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Nov. 24, 1972) thus suggesting to Toronto critics that Hébert was "more novelist than playwright" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24, 1972). The translation by Elizabeth Mascall was judged to be a "fair stab" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Nov. 24, 1972). Both critics labelled it a "Quebec" play.

Gélinas' *Mortier* (Factory Lab theatre, Dec. 6-21, 1972) received little critical attention and, as part of a short play festival that became "a killing marathon", was described as only a "dreary marriage game" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Dec. 7, 1972).

Michel Tremblay made a sensational return to Toronto with *Les Belles-Soeurs* (The St. Lawrence Centre Repertory Theatre Company, Mar. 31-Apr. 28, 1973). Described as a "milestone play, a high point for the St. Lawrence Centre" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, March 4, 1973) and "a breath of life that was notably Canadian" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Mar. 4, 1973) it was viewed as a Montreal or Quebec play which offered "a penetrating vision of Quebec society" (David McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 20, 1973). The production thus raised interesting questions about the Toronto audience's capacity to appreciate and understand Tremblay and Quebec theatre in general. U. Kareda urged the large crowds gathered at the O'Keefe Centre for *Move over Mrs. Markham* to "go next door" (*Star*, Mar. 7, 1973) but questioned the Toronto theatre goers' willingness and ability to "jump across the [cultural] intersection" to see "the municipally financed, locally produced, 10,000 times more entertaining *Les Belles Soeurs*." H. Whittaker referred as well "to a kind of mute edged condescension indelibly WASP" and hoped that "possibly later Toronto audiences [would] respond less consciously and [would] be able

to laugh directly without striking any bicultural notes" (*Globe and Mail*, March 4, 1973). It was not clear for example whether the Toronto audience who stood and cheered at the end of the play did so to show their praise for the production or their respect for the national anthem with which it ends (D. McCaughna).

René Dionne's translation was judged to be unacceptable only three weeks before the opening. Bill Glassco and John Van Burek quickly produced a second English version which, deemed "splendid and brilliant" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Apr. 4, 1973) and praised for having successfully captured "the flavour and earthiness of the language" (D. McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 20, 1973), was also described as "a massacre" (Myron Galloway, *Montreal Star*, Mar. 4, 1973). The latter critic also condemned the actresses' feigned accents claiming that they ranged "from Maine to Manchester" and concluded that Tremblay's play had nothing to say "if the French-Canadian flavour [was] missing for it [was] essentially a portrait of a very special segment of French-Canadian urban life." Even U. Kareda, who praised the translation in an article in which he discussed the difficulties in translating Tremblay, stated that the "play's strong political implications would be largely lost in English" (*Star*, Mar. 26, 1973).

Tremblay's *En pièces détachées*, (New Theatre, Bathurst Street, Mar. 5 - Apr. 15, 1974) rather "disgustingly re-titled *Montreal Smoked Meat*" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Mar. 8, 1974), did not, according to most critics, rank with his other works (D. McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 29, 1974). The production gave the impression of "a novel sliced up into theatrical segments" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Mar. 8, 1974) which did "add up to a theatrical experience though not quite a play" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Mar. 8, 1974). Tremblay was praised however for his role as "a first rate social critic" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Mar. 8, 1974). After *Les Belles Soeurs* however, the play was criticized for being merely a repetition of "more Montreal misery" (D. McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 29, 1974). H. Whittaker questioned the Toronto audience's willingness to accept Montreal's "squalid" side instead of the "quaint, charming, historic vision of Montreal to which [we] have been exposed to in the past" (Mar. 8, 1974). The translation did not receive any critical attention.

Michel Garneau's *Four to Four* (Tarragon, Mar. 30-Apr. 28, 1974) suffered from dealing only with "Quebec women" whose

background (D. McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 12, 1974) was too "exotic in an Ontario setting" (H. Whittaker *Globe and Mail*, Apr. 7, 1974). It was criticized for "thrusting itself in [our] faces with too much unnecessary venom" (D. McCaughna, *Toronto Citizen*, Mar. 12, 1974) with its "roaring choruses, overblown images and a quest for poetic importance which seriously damage[d] the work's early truthfulness" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Mar. 1, 1974). The play was also acclaimed as "a winner, a significant work" (Gregory Glover, *Sun*, Apr. 2, 1974) and Garneau was identified as "a brave dramatist" (H. Whittaker, Apr. 1, 1974). The translators were mentioned in the *Star* and *Globe* reviews though neither explained how their work may have affected the production.

Described as an "event" (Bruce Kirkland, *Star*, Jan. 11, 1977), a "landmark" (Charles Pope, *Scene Changes*, Jan. 1977), a "legend" (Gina Mallet, *Star*, Jan. 14, 1977) after which "Canadian theatre [was] not quite the same" (David Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977), Tremblay's *Hosanna* earned the playwright the reputation of "the darling of the critics and the chosen one of the Toronto theatre scene" (Ed Bean, *Varsity*, Sept. 29, 1974). A resounding success when it first opened at the Tarragon theatre (May 15-June 1, 1974), it continued to draw Toronto crowds in three subsequent productions (Global Village Theatre Sept.6-Oct.4, 1974, Toronto Workshop Productions Jan.13-Feb. 14 1977, NDWT Theatre, Mar. 11-22, 1980) and also ran at the Bijou Theatre on Broadway.

After its premiere at the Tarragon, critics described *Hosanna* as "a shimmering production" (U. Kareda, *Star*, May 16, 1974), "a brilliant exploration of a menage à deux" (*Toronto Citizen*, May 24, 1974), a "heart-pounding tour de force" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 16, 1974) and a "full blooded [...], powerfully written drama (M. Galloway, *Montreal Star*, June 11, 1974). It was undoubtedly "Tremblay's most successful play [to date]" (D. McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug. 1974) and one of the most popular plays ever to be written by a Canadian playwright (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 2, 1977).

The critics, especially those reviewing later productions, were not unanimously enthusiastic about the play's literary merit. It was described as a "weak Tremblay play" (Audrey Ashley, *Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 7, 1974) a "melodramatic" play (G. Glover, *Sun*, May 17, 1974) in which the writing was "not as

strong as in some of Tremblay's other works" (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977). The play's success was instead often attributed to the combined contribution of a "triumvirate of exceptional talents, Tremblay, Glassco, Monette" (John Fraser, *Globe and Mail* Sept. 14, 1974), or a "perfect fusion between writer and actor" (G. Glover, *Sun*, May 17, 1974); playwright, translator, director and actor were equally credited with having made "another major contribution to the Canadian theatre scene" (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977).

In preparation for its Broadway debut, *Hosanna* returned to the Global Village theatre and was pronounced not only "in trim for Broadway" (J. Fraser, *Globe and Mail*, Sept. 14, 1974) but "one of the best pieces of theatre [you'll] find in Toronto [this] season" (E. Bean, *Varsity*, Oct. 20, 1974). Full houses (A. Ashley, *Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 7, 1974) and rapid ticket sales (G. Anthony, *Sun*, Sept. 13, 1974) proved that indeed the "magic was still there" (G. Anthony, *Sun*, Sept. 13, 1974).

Critics responded to the Toronto Workshop's production of *Hosanna* less enthusiastically. Though still "a fine evening of theatre" (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977) and one of the "most satisfying evenings in theatre in Toronto (G. Mallet, *Star*, Jan. 14, 1977), *Hosanna's* dazzle had "worn a little thin" (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977). Criticism was levelled primarily at the lack of plot development (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977), the timing of Cuirette's return (John Herbert, *Onion*, Feb. 16, 1977) as well as at Tremblay's "corny and trite" treatment of homosexuality (J. Herbert, *Onion*, Feb. 16, 1977) which was described as a "tiresome emphasis of the obvious" (M. Porter *Sun*, Jan. 17, 1977). The mixed reaction could indicate that indeed the "production's most serious flaw [was] perhaps its nostalgic attempt to recreate its own past glories" (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977). This was confirmed by the critics' limited response to the NDWT production when once again attention was drawn to the play's structural problems (Katherine Gilday, *Star*, Mar. 16, 1980). *Hosanna* was perhaps "a trifle tattered" (Ray Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Mar. 17, 1980).

*Bonjour, là Bonjour* (Tarragon Theatre, Feb. 1-Mar. 16, 1975) did not evoke the unanimously positive response generated by *Hosanna's* premiere. According to Paula Dancy, it was clearly the weakest of the Tarragon Tremblay productions (Dancy 93). The

play was also described as "the most fascinating of Tremblay's work" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 3, 1975). Thanks to Bill Glassco's "thoughtful and respectful interpretation" which rendered the play "void of the rough joul" and thus able to "serve the Ontario audience well" it was in "no way a reproduction of the Quebec original" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 3, 1975). Urjo Kareda described it as "the most deeply flawed of his plays" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Feb. 3, 1975). P. Dancy maintains that Tarragon's ambiguous treatment of the incest issue, the conclusion of which was both "unthinkable and sentimental" (U. Kareda, *Star*, Feb. 3, 1975) was largely responsible for its poor reception (Dancy 47).

Billed with Carol Bolt's *Shelter*, Tremblay's *Surprise, Surprise*, (Toronto Arts Productions, St. Lawrence Centre, Oct. 22- Nov. 8, 1977), was described as "just a fragment" (J. Fraser, *Globe and Mail*, Oct. 23, 1975), "a short sketch" (John Wilson, *Varsity*, Nov. 14, 1975) and a "revue sketch" (M. Porter, *Sun*, Oct. 24, 1975). "A taughtly structured microcosm of ideas completely Canadian in content" (C. Pope, *Scene Changes*), "a deftly written and amusing morsel" (D. McCaughna, *Star*, Oct. 23, 1975) "rich in Quebec ambience and humour" (M. Porter, *Sun*, Oct. 24, 1975), *Surprise, Surprise* generated a positive though limited response.

The Black Cat Cabaret's production of *La Duchesse de Langeais* (May 22- June 28, 1980) suffered due to the age of the play. Labelled "a left-over from primal scream of gay lib" (Kaspars Dzeguze, *Sun*, June, 1980), this "minor Tremblay" was judged to be a "bad joke" whose subject, transvestism, had become a "bore" (G. Mallet, *Star*, June 5, 1980) and had since been more amusingly dealt with by films such as *La Cage aux Folles* (Debra Sharp, *Globe and Mail*, June 6, 1980). The latter critic praised Tremblay's use of language but did not mention that John Van Burek was the translator. The *Sun* critic noted Van Burek's "happy enough translation" but found the narrative at odds with the central actor's style.

With *St. Carmen of the Main* (Tarragon Theatre, Jan. 11- Feb. 26, 1978), a "tragedy pure and simple" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1978), Tremblay had mixed results. Both "preposterous and touching" (Richard Eder, *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1978), the play, according to one critic, "never rose above the level of a not very good soap opera" (Stephen Mezei, *Onion*, Feb. 8,

1978). However it was also described as "an absolutely fascinating gesture by a powerful playwright" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1978). The use of the chorus as well as the translation evoked an equally mixed reaction. The chorus which was endowed "with incredible panache" and given a choral ode that was "full of poetic imagery" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 16, 1978) was nonetheless described as "gimmicky", "a chorus of freaks" (Joseph Erdelyi, *Ottawa Citizen*, Jan. 17, 1978) and blamed for making the play "worse" (S. Mezei, *Onion*, Feb., 1978). P. Dancy points to Tremblay's inability to combine this ancient style with modern slang as the source of many of the problems facing the play (Dancy 63). Similarly the translation, praised by one critic for "maintaining a skilful retention of the French-Canadian disposition" (M. Porter, *Sun*, Jan. 16, 1978) was also accused of "not capturing much of the nuance, the savour" (Brian Freeman, *Star*, Jan. 15, 1978) and blamed, more importantly, for not conveying the play's "political fable". The play whose "spirit" was lost on the Toronto audience seemed "curiously uprooted" (B. Freeman, *Star*, Jan. 15). Only Freeman and Eder mentioned the play's political message but the latter condemned the political vision as "preposterous" while not explaining what the message really was. Ray Conlogue commented on the "long, lyrical speeches" without mentioning the translator.

Roland Lepage's *Le temps d'une vie*, though recognized for its literary merit, suffered from its limited regional subject matter. Bryan Johnson stated, "My problem and one I suspect I will share with many others is the subject matter itself" (*Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1978). Deemed "worth waiting for" (B. Freeman, *Star*, Apr. 15, 1978), the play earned Lepage praise for the "loving care with which he treated his subjects" (J. Erdelyi, *Ottawa Citizen*, Apr. 18, 1978) and for his "fine dialogue" and "deft sense of pacing" (Bryan Johnson, *Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1978). However, in spite of Sheila Fischmann's "excellent translation" (B. Johnson, *Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1978), the play remained a "lyrical look at simple habitant life" (J. Erdelyi, *Ottawa Citizen*, Apr. 15, 1978), an exploration of the "rural roots of French Canada" (B. Freeman, *Star*, Apr. 15, 1978) and essentially a play "about the soul of Quebec" (Jamie Porter, *Calgary Herald*, Apr. 30, 1978). It was therefore, according to the critics, too remote for the Toronto audience and questions were raised about the Toronto public's "burning

interest in a lyrical epic about one woman's life in rural Quebec" (B. Johnson, *Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1978).

Tarragon's production of *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra* (Tarragon Theatre, Nov. 20-Dec. 22, 1979) received mixed reviews and was a source of "controversy, curiosity and confusion" (Dancy 70). Though review articles frequently pointed to production faults, Tremblay was also held responsible for the confusion (Dancy 73). Condemned for its lack of action which rendered the play "boring" (M. Porter, *Sun*, Nov. 25, 1979), and described as "an unworthy play" (G. Mallet, *Star*, Nov. 23, 1979), it was also judged to be "a rewarding ritual experience" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 23, 1979). No critics commented on the translation nor on the play's social or political message.

*The Impromptu of Outremont* (Tarragon Theatre, May 22-June 28, 1980), Toronto's first glimpse at Tremblay's interpretation of the life of the upper classes, received a similar mixed reaction. The "pointless bickering and mechanical dialogue of Tremblay's rich bitches" (Art Cuthbert, *Star*, Apr. 23, 1980) was also described as an "engrossing, thickly textured play" which included "beautifully written, aria-like monologues" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, May 23, 1980). However, neither Conlogue nor any of the other critics credited the translator. Dancy suggests that directorial problems were to blame for the largely negative reaction (Dancy 95).

The "magic" (Norma Harris, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 20, 1982) of Jovette Marchessault's *The Saga of the Wet Hens* was largely lost on the Toronto audience either through "misdirection" that resulted in "much confusion" (N. Harris, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 20, 1982) or as a result of a "poor translation of shameless literary pretention" that "drown the Wet Hens in a flow of classy prose" (G. Mallet, *Star*, Feb. 19, 1982), the only mention of the translation. The audience's lukewarm reaction was also attributed to the cultural gap: the numerous allusions to the authors depicted as well as to the Catholic church as the key oppressor were lost on the Toronto audience (N. Harris, *Globe and Mail*, Feb. 20, 1982).

Roch Carrier's *Celestial Bicycle* suffered a similar fate. Though providing Albert Millaire, the star, with "an opportunity to do the things that superior actors do" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, Apr. 2, 1982), the play was essentially "lost in a smoke screen" (G. Maillet, *Star*, Apr. 2, 1982). Toronto's less than en-

thusiastic response to this Quebec hit was once again attributed to the language barrier "which never seemed more inseparable" (G. Mallet, *Star*, Apr. 2, 1982) and to the cultural gap; it simply did not "work with the anglophone sensibility" (R. Conlogue, *Globe and Mail*, April 2, 1982). Neither critic commented on the translation.

This study has shown that up until the arrival of Michel Tremblay on the Toronto English theatre circuit an average of only one Quebec play in translation was staged a year. However, from 1972-1980 Toronto audiences had the opportunity to see usually two, if not three, professional productions, at least one of these being a Tremblay play. Until Tremblay's Toronto debut in 1972, Gratien Gélinas and Jacques Languirand were the most often produced playwrights. However, reviews indicate that the authors often earned more praise than the plays themselves and it is very evident that the seventies belonged to Tremblay. Though not all of his plays received the same enthusiastic reviews, the number of plays professionally staged prove the writer's popularity and the theatre companies' confidence is his ability to attract an audience. Other playwrights, Michel Garneau, Jovette Marchessault and Roch Carrier, had only one play produced during this period. Furthermore, unlike Tremblay plays that were often staged by various companies, *Hosanna* in particular, each play was produced only once. However, as Paula Dancy points out, the initial decision to produce Tremblay was not without risks:

Tarragon made a daring decision to produce Tremblay because of his newness to the audience, his political affiliation, which always leaked through (intentionally) into the theme and structure of his plays, his subject matter and the questionable quality of the translation of his plays. (Abstract).

This latter point, the problem of translating Tremblay's trademark "joul," is particularly serious (see Homel and Simon 83-86) not only, as Vivien Bosley points out in her study of the English version of *les Belles-Soeurs*, because of the difficulty of finding an English equivalent, but because of "joul's" social, political and religious connotations and their repercussion in the text (Bosley 140-41). Bill Glassco was aware of this difficulty and, when referring to a discussion with John Van Burek, stated:

He [Van Burek] warned me however that it would be difficult to translate because of the joul, a peculiarly vibrant Québécois French which had become the language of the Quiet Revolution. (Glassco 1978)

This problem was far from surmounted. Tremblay himself claims that "the folkloric aspect of the language was missing" and that his plays will "never be as good in English as in French" (Usmiani 37). When asked for his opinion of the English translations of Tremblay, André Brassard, the author's friend and colleague replied: "Fatal. With a text whose main asset is the language, you lose at least a third of it" (Usmiani 41). Theatre critics described, for example, the translation of Tremblay's highly successful *Hosanna* as "occasionally clumsy" (Ed Bean, *Varsity*, Sept. 20, 1974), "a repetition of the same four letter words (A. Ashley, *Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 7, 1974) and as "too awkward and poetic" (David McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug. 1974) as well as "too shrill" (Jack Kapica, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 14, 1977). However more important that the flow of the English version was its failure to convey, or the critics' and public's failure to recognize, the political and social connotations of Tremblay's work. Tremblay's success cannot in fact be attributed to his ability to convey in popular language and to a sympathetic and informed audience the sentiments and preoccupations of Quiet Revolution and post October Crisis Quebec, nor to the fact that "when you're up to your ass in mud, any kind of solid ground is solid joy" (E. Bean, *Varsity*, Sept. 20, 1974). His popularity is instead due to the Toronto public's and theatre critics' capacity and willingness to interpret Tremblay's message as universal. Charles Pope stated:

... no other Canadian dramatist has succeeded so completely in creating startling, in terms of psychological insights as well as shock tactics and (sic) original theatre that is inherently Canadian without being provincial to the point of being incomprehensible to a non-Canadian audience. (Charles Pope, *Scene Changes*, Jan. 1977)

This confirms Wallace's observation that Toronto institutions need either to appropriate or dismiss work that is culturally different. In the case of Tremblay, the critical response dismisses the political, Quebec message while appropriating the universal elements. Hence Tremblay, the ardent québécois nationalist, be-

comes "Toronto's favourite *Canadian* (emphasis added) playwright" (U. Kareda, *Toronto Star*, June 5, 1975). This is particularly evident in the critical response to *Hosanna*.

Like all of Tremblay's plays, *Hosanna* contains a political message. As Tremblay himself stated:

I do not mean that they [Hosanna and Cuirette] are Quebec symbols or images of Quebec. But their problems with the wider society are political problems. Because they are the fringe group in society, this society in a way hates them. But they want to be happy and they want to be somebody. Hosanna is a man who always wanted to be a woman. This woman always wanted to be Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. In other words, this Québécois always wanted to be an English actress in an American movie about an Egyptian myth in a movie shot in Spain. In a way, that is a typically Québécois problem. For the past 300 years we were not taught that we were people, so we were dreaming about somebody else instead of ourselves. So *Hosanna* is a political play. (Anthony 283)

However, based on the critics' comments, the political aspect was largely missed. The play was instead seen as an exploration of the "poetics of love" (Agnes Kruchio, *Excalibur*, Sept. 19, 1974), a "study of deception and humiliation and the loss of dreams" (U. Kareda, *Toronto Daily Star*, May 16, 1974), a "sensitive delineation of a homosexual relationship" (D. McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug., 1974), or a "classic study of homosexual revenge" (George Anthony, *Toronto Sun*, Sept. 13, 1974) by "the Canadian theatre's most compassionate poet of *individual* (emphasis added) isolation" (U. Kareda, *Toronto Star*, May 16, 1974). According to H. Whittaker, Tremblay was talking about "deceptions and the need for them, and the loss of them and comfort in misery. About *any* (emphasis added) life, in fact" (*Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1974).

Those critics who did recognize an attempt at a political message downplayed it claiming that such an allegory was "far-fetched" (Charles Pope, *Scene Changes*, Jan. 1977) or that "there was no inkling of such an idea to be found in the play no matter how hard one looked for signs (John Hebert, *Onion*, Feb. 15, 1977). More relevant to this study is D. McCaughna's comment that though Tremblay is "a very political writer and all of his plays have dealt in one way or another with the condition of

Quebec society, it does not hit home that this is a play which has a great deal to do with Quebec" (*Motion*, July/Aug., 1974).

As stated above, the loss of meaning could in part be blamed on the translation. However, even those critics aware of the political message refused to acknowledge its importance suggesting that they chose instead to ignore from where the play was coming. Furthermore, the negative reaction elicited by the distinctive Quebec flavour and subject of Lepage's, Hébert's, Marchessault's and Carrier's plays suggests a rejection of the unfamiliar and a reluctance to accept and interpret the importance of place when this ceases to be quaint and familiar. Translation problems sometimes cited are perhaps partly responsible. Would more careful translation or perhaps even transposition of these distinctly Quebec plays have made them more accessible, more universal and hence more popular? This raises the much studied yet never resolved dilemma of allegiance (see Blodgett); should the translator "invade, extract and bring home" (Steiner 298) in order to attract a wider audience or "traduire oui, mais sans traduire" (Brault 50)? If indeed theatre goes and theatre critics attended Quebec plays to seize the opportunity "to learn, to know its differences, to understand Quebec's background and motivations" (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24, 1972), the latter approach would be preferable and such would surely be the objective of any theatre translator, company, reviewer or patron genuinely concerned with bridging the cultural gap and who saw translation "as a vehicle through which cultures travel" (Hemel and Simon 9). In this case it would be necessary, as Wallace suggests, to ask both from where the play was coming and to where it was going (Wallace 1990, 234) in order to guarantee successful and genuine exchanges between Canada's two main theatre communities.

## WORKS CITED

- Anthony, G. Ed. *Stage Voices: Twelve Canadian Playwrights Talk about their Lives and Work*. Toronto: Doubleday, 1978.
- Blodgett, D. "How do you say Gabrielle Roy?" *Translation in Canadian Literature*. Ottawa: UP Ottawa, 1983.
- Bosley, V. "Diluting the Mixture: Translating Tremblay's *les Belles-soeurs*." *Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction*. 2.2 (1980): 139-45.
- Brault, J. *Poèmes des quatre côtés*. Chambly: Editions du Norôit, 1975.
- Dancy, P. *Tremblay at Tarragon 1972-1981: The Plays, the Productions and the Critics*. Guelph, 1985.
- Glassco, B. "Michel Tremblay: A Unique Vision." *Toronto Daily Star*, Jan. 16, 1978.
- Hamel, D. and S. Simon. *Mapping Literature*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1988.
- Leonard, P. "Critical Questioning." *Canadian Theatre Review* 57 (Winter 1988): 4-10.
- O'Neill-Karch, Marie and Pierre Paul Karch. "Le théâtre québécois à Toronto." *Revue d'histoire littéraire du Québec, le théâtre*. Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1984.
- Steiner, G. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. New York and London: Oxford UP 1975.
- Usmiani, R. "Discovering the Nuance." *Canadian Theatre Review* 24 (Fall 1979): 38-41.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Where to Begin the Accusation." *Canadian Theatre Review* 24 (Fall 1979) 26-37.
- Wallace, R. "Towards an Understanding of Theatrical Difference." *Canadian Theatre Review* 55 (Summer 1988): 5-14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada*. Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990.