NEW STAGES: QUESTIONS FOR CANADIAN DRAMATIC CRITICISM

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Taking as its topic "recent Canadian drama," this special issue raises, I think, some significant questions in relation both to its designation of a specific genre and to its qualification in national terms. Yet perhaps the only obvious conjoining of the various articles gathered here is that they do, indeed, all concern dramatic production written/devised in the last few years. What I would like to examine in my own contribution to this topic are some of the questions raised by these articles. They demand, I believe, not only a reimagination of what might constitute appropriate material in the study of drama (the matter, then, of genre and canon), but also a consideration of the genre's connectedness (or not) to the broader field of Canadian literature.

Studying drama, whether we're looking at a published play-text or some other account of previously performed material, is always fraught by what we lack: the bodies that inhabit the words or images that exist as their impetus and then their trace. And even when that drama is conceived as body-less, then other lacks emerge; consider, for example, Ann Jansen's introduction to her recent collection of radio plays *Adventures for (Big) Girls*:

> When the radio plays in this collection were first broadcast, they were introduced by a woman's voice announcing "Adventure Stories for Big Girls." But those words on this page don't do justice to the excitement of the beginnings of these adventures. Michelle George *performed* the title; her voice was recorded, electronically treated and repeated. On air, the first few words were straightforward, but the word "big" took on a life of its own. It boomed out, the bass stressed, the word a few sizes larger than average. Then a tiny repetition, this time "big" not as declaration but much more tentative, almost squeaked and tilted into a question. Right after the final "girls," which was stated with a no-nonsense directness, came a voice collage, a

> kind of scat or sounding, picking up on the words in the title. The voice took off, accompanied by the beat of the series theme music composed by Beverley Johnston. In rapid succession, George lassoed a bunch of unladylike "la la la la la's," tossed in a vamped version of the Tarzan yell and wound up in a crescendo that sounded as if she was headed straight for the stratosphere.
>
> All that from a few simple words.
>
> (xi)

Therein lies what might be thought of as the essential problem of dramatic criticism: it can never do justice to the excitement of the adventure. Notwithstanding this dilemma, recent critical work has brought new questions to the fore largely as a result of an expanded range of materials that are taken up. This special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* is no exception. No longer is the focus of critical study of Canadian drama/theatre constrained to those texts of conventionally structured plays authored, almost exclusively, by white men—plays which, as Ric Knowles has deftly described it, appealed for "their sheer amenability to scholarship" (100). The canon, as in other branches of literary study, has not only been contested but also radically reshaped and reconditioned.

What constitutes the canon of (English-)Canadian dramatic literature has been extensively explored elsewhere.[1] I don't wish to repeat those arguments here, merely to highlight the sites of debate for, as with other branches of literature, this has been concentrated on questions of representation and identity. Thus, in the field of Canadian drama/theatre, it is not surprising that this debate has been conducted significantly around the emergence in the last decade or so of the various published anthologies. The arrival of three anthologies in the 1980s (Richard Perkyns's *Major Plays of the Canadian Theatre, 1934-1984* [1984], Richard Plant's *The Penguin Book of Modern Canadian Drama* [1984] and Jerry Wasserman's *Modern Canadian Plays* [1985]) marked an apparent coming of age for Canadian drama/theatre but, at the same time, marked a flurry of critical activity in examining what (or who) was (not) included. The republication of Wasserman's text, latterly as two volumes (1993 and 1994), provided an explicit response to critical commentaries on canonical exclusion and the new *Modern Canadian Plays* "gives us 31 rather than 22 playwrights, 39 rather than 33 plays. The proportion of male writers falls to 20 out of 31, and the number of female authored plays rises to fourteen and a half out of 39; we

gain a second play originally written in French and a play by a Native-author" (Johnson 44). Notwithstanding this "progress," as Robert Nunn points out in a review of the two volumes, "Wasserman's general introductions are disappointing. . . . In this new edition, the first volume is introduced by virtually the same text, which doesn't serve the new context of the new edition. Theatre scholarship in Canada has become more sophisticated over the last decade, as it has absorbed and applied disciplines like the new historicism and cultural materialism, and yet Wasserman doesn't reconsider the picture he drew in 1985. But in the meanwhile key terms like "region" and "nation," not to mention "canon," have been questioned, demystified, deconstructed, de-centred" (92). But, even if this criticism is deserved—and it is—, the fact remains that for the study of drama/theatre in Canada it is not enough to worry only or primarily about whose work gets into print and what critical discourses are brought to bear on such work. (Though, of course, I do not mean to diminish the importance of this critical activity; it is crucial to the vitality of the field.) What we must also attend to is the generic strait-jacket that drama/theatre has for too long been made to wear.

With an increasing acceptance of interdisciplinary studies in the Canadian academy *and*, all too importantly, the establishment of the discipline of performance studies in the United States (and its flagship journal *TDR*), what emerges as suitable cultural production for critical inquiry has begun to change. This special issue reflects that movement. Here are included not only articles about a range of published playtexts but writing about other forms of performance work which raise, we as Editors believe, important questions for our field, and, we hope, for the extended context of our study, Canadian literature. Or, to put this another way, if critics once worried about why "Canada's national theatre was devoted to the canon of a foreign country" (Filewod "National Theatre/National Obsession" 9), we are now, at last, worrying more about what kinds of dramatic production get recognition (not only critical, but, more crucially, financial[2]) and at what cost. As Ann Wilson comments, "[e]ven if Stratford has abandoned that name [Canada's 'national theatre'], the fact still remains that it receives the single largest operating grant from the Canada Council of any theatre in this country. Whatever sort of cultural independence Canada may have gained from Britain, Shakespeare still remains, at least financially, the dominant force in English-language theatre" (23).

If this "dominant force" instates the play over and over again as what constitutes the genre "drama/theatre," then many of those so-called new voices in Canadian dramatic production have looked to different and contesting modes of representation. Similarly, recent Canadian work in English has posed tough and pointed questions about the imperialism of language constructed and preserved through that living legacy of Shakespeare's texts. And, furthermore, it is helpful to remember that if words can be dramatized without bodies (as in those "Adventures for (Big) Girls"), then bodies can be dramatic without words. Reid Gilbert's article draws our attention to the significance of what he names "physical text" and in his reading of the work of the dance company Dancing Docs and Dandies contests "the spell of literary form," a useful reminder of the ubiquity and power of all types of construction.

The scope of the body is central, too, to Celeste Derksen's account of masculinity in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid.*[4] As she examines the actor's body as "a nexus of multiple, often contradictory gender and sexual ideologies," she brings into play precisely those questions of representation and identity that have dominated the canon-formation debate and takes them back to the site of the physical. Her article, I think, raises some all-important questions on the mechanics of positionality and their effects. What concerns her, significantly, is not only the body of the actor but her own body and the spectre it must be in the trajectory of the play's performance. Her spectatorial body as a woman is more naturally to be looked at —thanks to Laura Mulvey, we've known that for a long time.[5] But when Derksen assumes herself not only as a feminist spectator but a critical body, she poses a problem for the critical body as a whole. What positions can we assume as we read, view, respond, and desire the performances we seek to elucidate, analyze, describe and contain as words? I imagine those positions as a series of limits and transgressions which, as Michel Foucault has told us, "depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows" (34). Limits and trangressions not only for gender and sexuality but also for genre push us towards challenging new directions in our critical work and in understanding our situatedness in the cultural production that ensues. What is it that happens, we also need to know, when Michael Ondaatje's print text *The Collected Works of*

Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems shifts from single-authored work to collaborative script (the dramatic form co-created with JoAnn McIntyre)? What happens when the textual narrative becomes embodied? What happens when those bodies that will tell the story meet with those bodies who have contracted to hear and see it? What happens when the audience (in this case, Derksen) decides to tell the story all over again and through her own body? It is at this complicated juncture of textual and physical bodies, of production and reproduction, that we might learn a great deal.

Anne Nothof's discussion of the dramatic work of Tomson Highway brings to bear a further site for critical inquiry: the cultural pliability of "Canadian" drama. In terms of the canon expansion, it is Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* that "represents" Native work in the second edition of the Wasserman anthology/anthologies, an inclusion that brought to critical note the dangers of "tokenism."[6] Nonetheless, Nothof argues persuasively for the achievement of Highway's plays in speaking across cultures at the same time as they dramatize "their collision." That such an education of the Canadian theatre-going public might take place at all speaks dramatically to the shift in assumptions that the expanded canon has effected. In common with both Gilbert's and Derksen's articles, Nothof's discussion foregrounds questions of reception and the accommodation (a word I choose advisedly) of new assumptions for/in the theatre-going public. In the accommodation (again deliberately) of Highway's work on the main stages of Canadian theatre, what lessons have audiences learned about their "other" and what possibilities are there in a field of representation where it is still the case that most bodies walking out on the stage can be assumed to be "white"?

Lisa Coulthard continues the investigation of audience assumptions in her discussion of *The Noam Chomsky Lectures* as a play in progress. Her attention is to the play as "political theatre," a dangerous appellation as Maria DiCenzo has suggested elsewhere: "If the economic arguments [ever-larger subsidies needed to maintain the performing arts] work at all, they do so in the interests of larger, high-profile arts organizations, not smaller, experimental (dare I mention "political ones" (6). Daniel Brooks and Guillermo Verdecchia's play interrogates the adjectives and sub-genres applied to dramatic production and insists, in that way, on the necessity for "the political" to enter the visible of Canadian theatre. Turning to DiCenzo's argument about funding, their insistence seems well-made and, indeed, well-timed. Yet, referring back to Nothof's con-

sideration of cultural collision, the likelihood of accommodation must also be accounted for. To what extent does the shifting of audience expectations produce a space for such postmodern and 'political') insights to appear, to entertain, but not, ultimately, to inform? Coulthard's own doubts add to a sense of genre-bending as intellectual and/or aesthetic exercise at the expense of the production itself. Here, I think, we gain a clear picture of the risks that are inherent to a Canadian "canon" or "canons" expanded generically.

Perhaps the answer is to take it all a lot less seriously. Marta Dvorak discusses "carnivalesque comedians" doing just that and in what she sees as their Bakhtinian exploration of high and low proposes that "the political" may turn out to be those elements of the quotidian that most dramatic production (not to mention critical theory) has failed to incorporate. Stand-up comedy, generically marked as transgression and probably at the limits (if not a step or two beyond) of what might be considered "dramatic literature," expects (indeed, relies upon) an audience that answers back. As a genre it takes as explicit subject the very terms of its production. Auto-performance, scripted and not-scripted, has, as Dvorak notes, characterized much Canadian performance in the last decade. It is, of course, a survival strategy in the face of funding cutbacks; at the same time, it is also a strategic displacement of "the conventional distance between writer and speaker, between creator and performer" (Dvorak). Moreover, it challenges the behavioural conventions of mainstream theatre-going (sit still and be quiet). It is here, according to Dvorak, that community can be realized.[7]

Notwithstanding current critical concerns with notions of community (notably Alan Filewod's declaration that "*[c]ommunity* has no meaning: it has become merely an index of power" [3]), what binds these articles is an attentiveness to the production-reception relation, to a complicated and interrogatory examination of how drama/theatre comes to mean something (anything) in our Canadian culture. As the canon is expanded by the inclusion of mainstream theatre's others (women, people of colour, gays and lesbians) and the field is expanded by its inclusion and incorporation of heretofore "sub" or "non" genres (stand-up, performance art, political theatre), the configurations for audience and artist, writer and performer, critic and text shift and multiply. As Reid Gilbert so powerfully argues, these configurations produce the "special problems" inherent in performance criticism. How is it that we

can re-enact the ephemeral present that constitutes the work? What kinds of writing can perform that very absence of a verifiable and single "truth"? What in this endeavour might prove useful to the critic of, say, the Canadian novel whose artefacts for study at least seem to have a more permanent status?

Elsewhere, the prevalence of interest in the funding "battles" (to keep DiCenzo's military metaphor) in the performing arts might, I think, be extended to other areas of Canadian cultural production. How is it that we get the texts we do that we then call "Canadian literature" and at what costs, literal and metaphorical?[8] In an historical moment where critical self-consciousness about canon, genre and the very business we think it is we do, these, in the end, become the crucial questions. They are the questions that not only Canadian drama/theatre and its attendant scholars must traverse, but all those texts and critics who might imagine themselves and/or their work as somehow constitutive of that "Canadian literature" this journal attempts to study.

NOTES

[1] The best article in this area is Richard Paul Knowles's "Voices (off): Deconstructing the Modern English-Canadian Dramatic Canon" in *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*. Ed. Robert Lecker. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, 91-111. More recently and useful especially in its response to Knowles's argument is Chris Johnson's "'Wisdome Under a Ragged Coate': Canonicity and Canadian Drama" in *Contemporary Issues in Canadian Drama*. Ed. Per Brask. Winnipeg: Blizzard Press, 1995. 26-49.

[2] See Maria DiCenzo's introduction "Battle Fatigue: Notes from the Funding Front" to the special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* (Number 82, Spring 1995), 5-9.

[3] Also of interest here for its consideration of performative and performed language is Michael Sidnell's "Used Words" (*Canadian Theatre Review* 75, Summer 1993, 4-7).

[4] In her first footnote to her article, Derksen points out that an earlier version was presented at the 1995 meeting of the Association for Canadian Theatre Research/Association de la recherche théâtrale au Canada. I'd like to add that her presentation there was the first recipient of the Bob Lawrence Award for Outstanding Work by a junior scholar.

[5] Her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" was published in the Autumn 1975 issue of *Screen* (number 16), 6-18.

[6] See Johnson 44.

[7] See Alan Filewod's discussion of community as an "overused and devalued" word adds some caution to this position. See "The Spectre of Communi**" in *Canadian Theatre Review* 82 (Spring 1995), 3.

[8] This is a question that was taken up by Frank Davey in "Canadian Canons," a response to Robert Lecker's "The Canonization of Canadian Literature: An Inquiry into Value." Both were published in *Critical Inquiry* 16.3 (Spring 1990): Lecker's article consists pages 656-671, Davey's 672-681.

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