

INTRODUCTION

Mary Ann Beavis and Moira Day

Guest Editors

POP. No food for your immortal souls—that's what ails everybody 'round here—little, shrivelled-up, peanut-size souls. [...] Why do you think so many people go to the bughouse around here, anyways? Because they've starved an' tormented their souls, that's why! Because they're against God an' don't know it, that's why!

ETHEL. That's blasphemous!

POP. It ain't blasphemous! They try to make God in their own little image an' they can't do it same as you can't catch Niagara Falls in a teacup. God likes music an' naked women an' I'm happy to follow his example.

Robertson Davies, *Overlaid* (99)

This Special Issue on Religion and Theatre in Canada is the result of a Call for Papers originally circulated in 2005 by Moira Day of the Department of Drama, the University of Saskatchewan, and Mary Ann Beavis, Department of Religious Studies and Anthropology, St. Thomas More College. Religion was broadly defined as that relating to human spirituality, concerned with the divine and with sacred or holy things, including particular religious traditions, philosophies, institutions or theologies, and the expression of spirituality in ritual, worship, devotion and mystical experience. Theatre was broadly defined as that relating to the creation of dramatic material, as well as its realization in production and performance before a live audience, including amateur, educational, and professional theatre, paratheatrical activities and texts (including closet drama), and the elements of playwriting, acting, directing, costume and scene design, architecture, audience dynamics and theatre management. Through proposing such an issue, the editors hoped to explore the dynamic intersection of religion and theatre as shaped within or by Canada, past and present, as a geographical, human and conceptual reality.

The five articles in this issue were selected through a review process whereby each manuscript was refereed both by a scholar with expertise in Drama and one from the field of Religious Studies. They are arranged roughly chronologically and provide an album that captures aspects of both the theatrical and religious history of Canada from the early twentieth century to today.

It is difficult to begin a discussion of the intersection between religion and theatre in Canada—past and present—“as a geographical, human and conceptual reality” without making reference to the witty, urbane early comedies of Robertson Davies. The world, he suggests in the epilogue to his popular one-act play, *Overlaid* (1947), is divided into two groups: one composed “of the life-enhancing people” represented by Pop, the defiant champion of opera, music and the arts as the real nurturers of the soul in an otherwise spiritually starved community; the other, composed of “the life-diminishing people” represented by his daughter, Ethel, whose narrow, joyless church religion denigrates the arts as either evil or extravagant and sucks stronger souls dry with the sheer power of her “belief in [her] own goodness” (108). “Society,” Davies concludes, “is the battleground where these two armies fight continually for supremacy [...]. It reflects, I think, a situation that we shall have in Canada for a long time” (116).

More than that, he suggests in his 1948 play, *Hope Deferred*, that the first decisive shot in that battle had actually been fired over 250 years ago in New France, when the then-Governor Frontenac had proposed staging a production of Molière’s *Tartuffe*. Tragically, for the future of arts, culture and theatre in Canada, Davies suggests, the army of the “life-diminishing people” led by Bishop Laval and Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, emerge triumphant from the field in 1693, having managed to suppress not just the play, but theatre itself in Canada for the remainder of the French régime.

Davies is not completely unsympathetic to the arguments made by the two Roman Catholic prelates, but he clearly agrees with Frontenac, that there is “no tyranny like that of organized virtue”(76) in suppressing the flourishing of the arts, and that these “good men exert a dreadful pressure” that may have an influence far beyond 1693. Even by 1948, Davies implies, Canada still is slow to see itself as anything other than a “new land [that] has no time for amusements which may be destructive” (73).

Kym Bird’s “Habits of Independence: Cross-border Politics and Feminism in Two World War I Plays by Sister Mary Agnes” sheds a fresh and interesting new light on the involvement of Roman Catholic religious orders—and women’s orders in particular—in the developing theatre in Canada prior to 1950. While there was certainly some secular drama in New France, the earliest known play production in Québec was a religious play by the Jesuits in 1640 (Doucette 9). There are also at least three records of the Ursuline nuns doing religious plays with the girl students at

their school in 1668, 1691 (22) and 1727, with Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier (31) being present at the last two productions at least. Even more significantly, notes Doucette, these plays were likely being done by both the Jesuits and Ursuline nuns as part of a larger ongoing policy of using drama to teach religious instruction to children and aboriginal converts:

The Ursuline nuns also, who had arrived in the colony just the preceding year [1639], and to whom the education of young women was entrusted, made regular use of carefully chosen dramatic excerpts. As the anonymous chronicler of their history wrote, referring to the 1670s:

In order to develop our pupils' memories, to furnish them with a useful store of edifying material, and in order also to teach them a certain grace of gesture and movement, it is customary in our classes to have them learn by heart some 'pastoral' or other religious play, for the occasion of certain annual feast-days, and above all at Christmastime. For this sort of exercise, each student takes on a role. (qtd. in Doucette 11)

First established as a teaching Order in 1544, the Ursulines joined an even longer tradition going back to the tenth century C.E. of women playwrights in the West using religious playwriting and performance for instructional purposes. Far from inhibiting all creative activity in Canada, the Ursulines, and their descendants—French and English—were among the first playwrights, and women playwrights in particular, in a Canada where it was difficult for European theatre of any kind to flourish because of low population, urbanization and literacy.

Sister Mary Agnes, a Holy Names sister who published and staged most of her plays at St. Mary's Academy in Winnipeg in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was thus less an anomaly than a late representative of a tradition of women's educational playwriting that went back to the late Middle Ages in Europe and the seventeenth century in New France. Yet, as Bird points out, Mary Agnes's unique background also helped make her an unusually successful and prolific writer in her own time. She was one of the few writers who was able to get her work published for the school and youth market when few scripts from Canada were published anywhere, a situation which did not change significantly until after 1950 and the start of the professional theatre in Canada. At a time when the Canadian theatre was little more than a touring

theatre run by international interests, Bird argues that Sr. Mary Agnes not only survived but prevailed as a successful and prolific woman playwright in Canada due to a religious tradition that ironically liberated as much as it confined her. This paradoxical quality of the simultaneous confinement and liberation of women religious is reflective of the history of women's orders, which for centuries offered some Catholic women more freedom to develop their talents than would have been possible in traditional family life.

In "Roy Mitchell and *The Chester Mysteries*: Experience, Initiation and Brotherhood," Scott Duchesne explores the work of a playwright who was the chronological contemporary of Sr. Mary Agnes, but in terms of his approach to both religion and theatre, was worlds apart. Both theosophy and social gospel Christianity were eighteenth- and nineteenth-century responses to a world that was being profoundly changed by the Industrial Revolution. In one stream, social gospel Christianity underlay the development of extension or adult education drama, especially in Western Canada over the 1920s-1940s. Theosophy ("divine wisdom"), founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, has been described as "the most important neo-religious creation of the nineteenth century," a synthesis of European "occult" traditions and non-European religions resulting in "a supra-confessional, universalistic, 'primitive' and 'world' religion, intended as a contrast with the orthodoxies of Judaism and the Christian churches, along with 'materialistic' Darwinism" (Linse, 1884). As dramatically understood and theatrically realized by Roy Mitchell, Theosophy underlay profound reforms in the Art Theatre movement in Canada. While Mitchell ultimately hoped that Hart House Theatre would be the seat of a truly national Canadian theatre along the lines of the Abbey Theatre in Ireland, he also introduced significant European and American reforms in acting, text and design into the Canadian theatre. For Mitchell, as for people like Copeau and Artaud in his own time, and Grotowski, Brook and Barba in a later era, a significant rebirth of the theatrical art went hand in hand with a significant revisioning and understanding of human spirituality. In this regard, Duchesne powerfully argues that Mitchell was not an innovative theatre practitioner *despite* his theosophical beliefs but *because* of them. Mitchell and his innovative work at Hart House Theatre in the early 1920s undoubtedly cast a long shadow over the developing Canadian theatre of the inter-war era. Mitchell counted members of the Group of Seven among his designers at Hart House Theatre and another contemporary, Herman Voaden, also

wrote strikingly original expressionistic dramas with strong pantheistic and nationalistic overtones. Nonetheless, Mitchell's theatre really was to prove "the impossible theatre" in a Canada that had neither the personnel, money or resources to develop a professional theatre, nor—as Robertson Davies wryly noted in 1947—much of a motivation to develop one, given its continuing Calvinist preoccupation with "duty," "goodness," and "necessity" over the "warm an' kind of mysterious" ("Overlaid" 103).

In "George Ryga's 'Hail Mary' and Tomson Highway's Nanabush," Barbara Pell moves into the early professional era and a discussion of a play—*The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*—that has been seen as having the same impact on the development of Canadian playwriting and an avant-garde, nationalist alternative theatre to support it, as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had on the English Theatre of the 1960s. At the same time, by contrasting *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* with Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*, Pell also measures the distance that Canadian playwriting has come since 1967, with new voices and new spiritualities from other non-European traditions beginning to enter the mainstream. The article also traverses the distance between what Pell calls a "Euro-Christian sacrificial tragedy" and a "hilarious comedy" that transforms "Native adversity" into "humour and love and optimism, plus the positive values taught by Indian mythology" (Tomson Highway, qtd. in Pell). If Western theatre goes back to the Greeks and a mythical/religious understanding of the world and the universe, argues Highway, and much of Western literature has "Christian mythology" as a "central underpinning" then for aboriginal drama "to achieve any degree of universal resonance or relevance, any degree of performance, Indian mythology must lie at its very root" (Highway 421). The cultural and spiritual space between these plays is illustrated by the distance between the suffering Christ figure Rita and the Ojibway trickster Nanabush, celebratory of "a vibrant Native spirituality." Although less than twenty years chronologically divide Highway's play from Ryga's, they are, as Pell suggests, universes apart in their understanding of the religious and its significance to aboriginal life and theatre.

If Pell's paper measures the distance traveled in Canadian playwriting between Ryga and Highway, Janet Tulloch and Tanit Mendes measure the distance in scene design between Roy Mitchell for Hart House Theatre and Michael Levine for the Canadian Opera Company ("Set Design as Cosmic Metaphor: Religious Seeing and Theatre Space"). Like Mitchell, Wagner repudiated the spiritual and material bankruptcy of the nineteenth-

century commercial stage, in favour of a new transcendent form of theatre that returned to the power of myth and spirituality coursing beneath the surface of everyday life. Both men also conceived that new theatre in terms of revolutionary new forms of architecture, music, art and design that at once validated a distinct national spirit and situated its aspirations within the larger movements of the human soul. Over a century after Wagner wrote it, the Canadian Opera Company revisits Wagner's Ring Cycle and remakes *Die Walküre* (2004) and *Siegfried* (2005) anew on the contemporary Canadian stage for a contemporary Canadian audience using more advanced, dense and sophisticated forms of religious "seeing" in architecture, costume and design than could have been realized in either nineteenth-century Germany or early twentieth-century Canada. Combining an expanding mythic/spiritual vision with the expanding material means to achieve it, Mitchell's heirs, over 80 years later, continue to pursue "the impossible theatre" in the form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of opera. In particular, Tulloch and Mendes show how "theological architecture" (Gary Taylor) of the physical space in Levine's set designs facilitates "religious seeing" on the part of the audience.

Paul Corey ends the issue with an intriguing view of Canadian theatre ("Canadian Theatre and the Tragic Experience of Evil") that asks if the cerebral relativism of post-modernism is an adequate response to the moral, spiritual and material complexities and dilemmas of a post-9/11 world where an older, more fundamentalist understanding of the sacred, dismissed by Davies and many of his contemporaries as outmoded and life-denying, has returned with terrifying force to confront and challenge the present. Contrary to twentieth-century critics like Joseph Krutch or Friedrich Durrenmatt who argue that the tragic vision has become obsolete in the contemporary world, and only a grim form of black humour remains to us as the legitimate drama of the post-nuclear world, Corey argues that a return to tragedy, as reinterpreted as a complex mythical/religious understanding of the world and the universe, may be the only way for drama to address the new realities of a twenty-first century ravaged by terrorism and apocalypticism. The Greek tragic vision of evil, which forces the audience to confront "the most repugnant aspects of the human condition," Corey argues, was crucial for the genesis of theatre in the West and can serve as a reminder that, while a tragic universe cannot offer a definitive solution to the problem of evil, it can try to keep it at bay.

Obviously, this issue can only present a sample of the possible interactions between religion and theatre in the Canadian national context. One obvious lacuna is the absence of non-"Western" reli-

gious traditions (e.g., Asian, African),¹ since Canada is the first country to have adopted an official multiculturalism policy (1988). The editors hope that these essays will invite further reflection on the history and future of religion and theatre in Canada.

NOTES

1. Although Theosophy is a fusion of elements from Eastern and Western religions, it is a European construction of a “universal” religion.

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MARY ANN BEAVIS AND MOIRA DAY
RÉDACTRICES INVITÉES

PRÉSENTATION

POP. Y’a rien pour nourrir vos âmes immortelles—c’est ça qui marche pas avec tout le monde par icitte—vos p’tites âmes toutes rabougries. [...] Pourquoi tu penses qu’il y a tellement de monde à l’asile? Parce qu’ils ont l’âme affa-