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THE IMPOSSIBLE THEATRE: ROY MITCHELL AND *THE CHESTER MYSTERIES*: EXPERIENCE, INITIATION AND BROTHERHOOD

This article considers the influence of Theosophy in the theatre work and theory of director Roy Mitchell (1884-1944). Mitchell's apparently prescient theories concerning *mise en scène*, motion in acting and the communal role of the audience in the experience of theatre in his popular book *Creative Theatre* (1929) has led scholars such as Mavor Moore and Renate Usmiani to compare Mitchell's work with that of Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski. What has been neglected, however, is Mitchell's conviction that theatre is a "medium of revelation" that allows for the universal and, most importantly, the "creative," vital spirit or soul to manifest itself in the material world and to foster the "great end" he called the *paradosis*; this he defined as a "re-creating instant" in which the senses are filled with "form and sound," the emotions stirred "to sympathy," and ideas shaped "to one intense accord." This event makes for the witness "a causeway into an inner world where they rested in a lightning flash of communion." In this way Mitchell envisioned the re-creation of an idealized, "ancient" form of performance, by way of the confluence of theosophical and theatrical practice, in an effort to "proclaim the immortality of the souls of all created things, to restate the law of the cyclic return of souls and of the effects of the deeds of souls, to enunciate the doctrine that all religions, philosophy and science at their highest emanated from a body of custodians of the wisdom of the race."

Cet article examine l'influence de la théosophie sur la théorie et les œuvres dramatiques du réalisateur Roy Mitchell (1884-1944). Dans son populaire livre, Creative Theatre (1929), Mitchell avait élaboré des théories apparemment presciantes concernant à la fois la mise en scène, l'interprétation et le mouvement, de même que le rôle des spectateurs dans l'expérience du théâtre. Ainsi, des chercheurs, dont Mavor Moore et Renate Usmiani, ont comparé les œuvres de Mitchell à ceux d'Antonin Artaud, de Bertolt Brecht, de Peter Brook et de Jerzy Grotowski. Ce qui n'a pas été étudié, par contre, c'est la conviction de Mitchell pour qui le théâtre est un « véhicule de révélation, » permet-

tant l'éruption, dans le monde matériel, de l'âme ou de l'esprit vital universel et, plus important encore, de l'âme « créative. » Ce « véhicule de révélation » permet aussi l'avènement de la « grande fin » qu'il nomme le paradosis et qu'il définit comme un « bref moment de récréation » pendant lequel les sens sont éveillés par « la forme et le son, » les émotions aspirées vers « la sympathie » et les idées rassemblées dans « un intense accord. » Cet événement crée pour les spectateurs « une chaussée qui mène vers un monde intérieur où ils reposent dans un éclair de communion. » De cette façon, Mitchell avait imaginé la récréation d'une méthode de performance idéalisée et « ancienne, » par le biais de la confluence des pratiques théosophiques et dramatiques dans le but de « proclamer l'immortalité de l'âme de toute chose créée, de réaffirmer la loi cyclique du retour de l'âme et des effets des actions de l'âme, d'énoncer la doctrine selon laquelle toutes les religions, la philosophie et les sciences émanent, et à leur plus haut degré, d'un groupe d'individus qui sont les gardiens de la sagesse de l'être humain. »



In the conclusion to his handbook *Theosophy in Action* (1923), Canadian director, theorist and occult philosopher Roy Mitchell (1884-1944) meditates on the efficacy of the relationship between his theatre practice and his spiritual practice. As he often did, he begins his consideration of the issue at hand by posing a series of questions to the reader that clearly reflected his state of mind: “Because I am of the theatre shall I make this Theosophical Society which has given me so much and which I love for it, a cockpit for all the quarrels, jealousies, and frenzies of the theatre? Should I not rather carry my ideas of Theosophy into the theatre?” (84). His response to his aporia is telling in terms of its focus and of its scope:

There is surely no problem here if we stay with the principle involved; if we feel in our hearts what we say with our lips that Theosophy is a whole world and a whole culture and an ample field in which no fertile mind need fall for lack of work; if we decide that Theosophy is to be kept above our karma and the swirl of our desires; if we confine ourselves to pure Theosophy and leave the debatable and always difficult application of it to individuals working in other spheres than ours. (84-85)

True to his rhetorical habits, Mitchell's answer rises above the question of theatre into the larger question of the place of theosophy in the life of its committed students, for which *Theosophy in Action* was intended. "Our work is for the world," he writes, "and when we labour for the world we achieve our great end" (48). Mitchell believed that those who laboured towards such ends in North America played a vital role in the health and welfare of the "whole world" and the "whole culture" he and other Theosophists in Canada inhabited in the 1920s. It was a world and a culture rapidly changing under "the steady materialization of thought under the influence of positive science" (Mitchell, *Exile* 32), but one also in the midst of an "occult revival," led by a number of avant-garde movements in Canada, with theosophy leading the way, promising a new age of enlightenment for all aspects of North American culture, including theatre.¹

For Mitchell, the setting for this revival and the struggle against the materialist mindset was found in the theatre. In his best known book, *Creative Theatre* (1929), Mitchell writes, "We of the theatre are the sole and responsible custodians of the art of the living soul of man swirling out into a visible, plastic medium of revelation" (189). This "medium of revelation," according to Mitchell, allows for the universal, and, most importantly, the "creative" vital spirit or soul to manifest itself in the material world and to foster the "great end" he called the *paradosis*. This he defined as a "re-creating instant" in which the senses are filled with "form and sound," the emotions stirred "to sympathy," and ideas shaped "to one intense accord." This makes for the witness "a causeway into an inner world where they rested in a lightning flash of communion" (*Creative* 6) that can "bring the conflicting elements of the theatre into life-giving relation to each other" (xix). In this way Mitchell envisioned the re-creation of an idealized, "ancient" form of performance, by way of the confluence of theosophical and theatrical practice, in an effort to "proclaim the immortality of the souls of all created things, to restate the law of the cyclic return of souls and of the effects of the deeds of souls, to enunciate the doctrine that all religions, philosophy and science at their highest emanated from a body of custodians of the wisdom of the race" (*Theosophy in Action* 2).

Mavor Moore called Mitchell's vision the "Impossible Theatre" (Moore 70), and perhaps Mitchell shared his opinion. The "debatable and always difficult application" of theosophy he refers to in *Theosophy in Action* might well have applied to the varying success of his practical work. By 1923 Mitchell had worked

with several companies, most notably in the position of Artistic Director at Hart House Theatre from 1919-1921, but had not found anyone willing and/or able to fully commit to the long-term practical development of his vision of theatre. Perhaps in response to this state of affairs, from 1921 to 1927 he turned almost exclusively to lecturing on theosophy and the little theatre across Canada and the United States, and writing prolifically about both subjects. This work established his status as an outstanding representative of the Theosophical Society in North America during the 1920s, as did the publication of two of his major textbooks on theatre: *The School Theatre* (1925) and *Creative Theatre* (1929). The latter was the most complete expression of his vision, which also closely reflected the kind of work he engaged with in his Theosophical studies. He found greater success in his move to theory than in actual practice, and in turn his theoretical work inspired a generation of North American theatre makers, amateur and professional alike.

That being said, I want to suggest that one of Mitchell's productions prior to 1921 can stand as a practical representative, if not a complete realization, of his vision: his annual staging of selected sections from The Chester Mystery plays from 1917 to 1921, which he entitled *The Chester Mysteries*.² I will argue that Mitchell's assessment of the Chester Mystery plays as "communal plays of a simpler age and dramatic experiment" (Conroy and Mitchell 5) connects the cycle not only to his theories on theatrical practice but, most importantly, to his theosophical beliefs. In particular I will show that Mitchell placed the greater emphasis in his production on "mystery," as theatre as a "medium of revelation," that created an association with the sacraments of the Christian church and with the pre-Christian mystery religions venerated by Theosophists and other occult groups.

The central themes in much of Mitchell's work on theosophy and theatre during this period are an acute sense of loss and the need for recovery in an age that declared itself liberated from the very philosophies that Theosophy in particular embraced. In his worldview there is an apprehension that humanity, before industrialization, before the notion of evolutionary progress and the encroachment of scientific materialism, was once in closer touch with the "divine" and intimately familiar with the "lightning flash" of *paradosis*. He felt that the twin evils of the modern world—industrialization and materialism—had contaminated that relationship to the point where it had almost disappeared from the culture. Writing on the persistence of theology, for example,

Mitchell claims that in it “there is just enough of the element of truth to arouse in men the vague memory of a truth they once held but have forgotten and cannot quite recall” (*Exile* 65). His critiques of biology, psychology, philosophy, and the commercial theatre all resonate with this shared thought, and his efforts to recover and revive that “truth,” as we will see, establishes the primary nexus between his theosophical and theatre work. His production of *The Chester Mysteries* is a clear example of his practical efforts.

Generally speaking, Mitchell is better known as a theatre director. In particular, his apparently prescient theories in *Creative Theatre* concerning *mise en scène*, motion in acting, and the communal role of the audience in the experience of theatre have led scholars such as Mavor Moore and Renate Usmiani to compare Mitchell’s work with that of Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski. While a comparison made between Mitchell’s work and that of these artists/theorists (and, in terms of his concept of motion, Eugenio Barba) might yield some interesting correspondences, such an analysis privileges the practical element of Mitchell’s work at the expense of, what was to him, its equally crucial spiritual element. Mitchell was, first and foremost, a devoted student of the occult sciences and a scholar of the esoteric arts. His vision of a “forthright, ingenuous, native, friendly theatre” (*Creative* 125) was informed as much by the Theosophical vision of a universal brotherhood of mankind as it was influenced by his distaste for the commercial theatre of the syndicates. His experiments with lighting and set design, as well as his eclectic choices of repertory and approach to performance reflected theosophy’s emphasis on comparative research, as his theories of the stage and the actor reflected the aesthetic influence of E.G. Craig and Jacques Copeau, respectively. Mitchell was not only a person of the theatre and of letters; he was perhaps more significantly a person of theosophy, and that commitment found its way onto his stage and into his writing.

That Mitchell’s theosophical belief profoundly influenced his ideas about theatre in theory and in practice is a well established fact, which Usmimani makes explicit in her pioneering 1987 essay, “Roy Mitchell: Prophet in our Past.” However, in terms of her examination of the influence of theosophy on Mitchell’s work she, like Mavor Moore, mainly concentrates her efforts on illustrating how Mitchell “actually translated his often mystical, theoretical concepts [...] into the practical realities of the theatre” (161). While she is generous with her description of theosophy and its obvious influence on Mitchell, Usmiani resists the full integration

of his theatre practice and his spirituality, relegating the latter to a place of lesser importance. In response, this article will deal not only with the “practical realities” of Mitchell’s theatre-making, but also with his idealized vision of his “creative” theatre, which he worked on from 1921-1927 (perhaps even earlier) and fully described in his 1929 book of the same name.³ While imbued with the spirit of the little theatre movement in Canada, *Creative Theatre* is equally steeped in the world of theosophy.

I am responding in this way to try to counter the effect of Usmiani’s analysis, which gives the impression that Mitchell imagined the stage as a mere “picture,” that the “innovative combination of stylization and lighting effects was Mitchell’s most outstanding contribution” to North American theatre (163), constructing Mitchell as more a master craftsman than a spiritual advocate. Most problematically, Usmiani’s analysis suggests that the theosophical elements of his work, as important as they were to Mitchell, were recognized by only a discerning few, rendering them less meaningful to an understanding of his work. Mitchell’s dictum, “The stage is not a picture: It is a place” (*Creative* 221), gives us a clear idea of where he stood on the issue of “stylization” and “effects” in relation to his spiritual beliefs; for Mitchell they were the means to expressing the vital spirit of humanity. In *Creative Theatre* he writes, “[t]he best actors know that they are not an end but a means” (4). The objective, the creation of the *paradox*, does not dwell in the actor who is “only its oracle” (6). The same could be said of all the practical elements of his theatre.

In addition, by Usmiani’s own admission, her brief description of theosophy in her article “does not mention certain key elements, such as [H.P.] Blavatsky’s Secret Doctrine, the concern with the occult, numbers and other symbolism, and the varied paths of mysticism, all of which were matters of great interest to Roy Mitchell” (158). Usmiani’s choice not to integrate these crucial elements into her examination is understandable, but it further reduces the importance of Mitchell’s religious convictions in terms of his overall conception of theatre. It is the objective of this article to function as a companion to Usmiani’s article, to address Mitchell’s understanding of these “key” elements, outlined primarily in *Theosophy in Action* and the posthumously published *The Exile of the Soul* (1983), a collection of connected articles and lectures (among other texts) written for the *Canadian Theosophist*. This article also intends to use his production of *The Chester Mysteries* as a practical example in order to construct a more complete assessment of how his work in the study of theosophy

influenced his ideas about theatre. In particular, I want to show the correspondence between the concept of the “Soul”/“Ego,” the theatre as *paradosis*, and the function of *motion* in the actor as the nexus between the two.

Throughout the 1920s Mitchell had developed a complex reading of theosophy, one that did not necessarily correspond with any one theory by any one person. According to a brief biography written by John L. Davenport, from a young age Mitchell had been “intensely interested in philosophy, comparative religion and the mystical meanings of mythology” (*Exile* 10), and this range of thought was reflected in his conception of theosophy. While he considered himself a follower of Helena Petrovona (H.P.) Blavatsky (1831-1891) and “always insisted on the importance of adhering to [her] original idea sources” (*Exile* 105), he was not always in agreement with all of her methods or her conclusions. In addition, while the Toronto Theosophical Society (TTS) was dominated throughout the 1920s by founder Alfred E.S. Smythe’s (1861-1945) devotion to Indian philosophy, Mitchell disagreed with several of Smythe’s tenets, in particular philosopher Shankara’s conception of “radical monism,” which many members of the TTS adhered to.⁴ Mitchell’s theosophy, like his theatre theory, was a well-made synthesis, a *bricolage* of such diverse elements as Jungian thought, the poetry of Walt Whitman, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Cabbala, Neo-Platonist thinking, and, of course, Olcott and Blavatsky, among others. His system of belief reflected the diversity of thought and objectives found in his spiritual home, the Toronto Theosophical Society.

As an international movement, theosophy officially began its life in 1875 in New York with its co-founders Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), Blavatsky, and later William Quan Judge (1851-1896), although many members would claim far older and more exotic origins.⁵ From the beginning it was a fertile amalgam of various theologies, Eastern and Western, peppered in the beginning with a liberal dash of spiritualism (an *ism* “destined from its very birth to degenerate into necromancy,” wrote Mitchell in *Theosophy in Action* 4). From its formation in 1891 onwards, the membership of the TTS came from an eclectic set of religious and social backgrounds. Ann Davis has suggested that the society attracted people involved in “a liberal Christianity open to mysticism” (a worldview that influenced the staging of *The Chester Mysteries*) and that its members “put new emphasis on intuition, equality, freedom, individualism, and nature” (97). Members were drawn to theosophy for many reasons—its involvement with

progressive social movements such as suffrage, its acceptance of women in leadership positions, its promotion of Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, and its inclusive attitude to the Occult—but Mitchell, like many others, was drawn to its engagement with esoteric thinking as a means to resist the rise of scientific materialism and mechanization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mitchell joined the TTS in 1909. In 1908 he had become a member of the Arts and Letters Club (a haven for fellow theosophists) and by 1910 had started to stage friezes, tableaux, and modern plays (often by fellow members of the Theosophical Society, including W.B. Yeats) for the pleasure of the members. His work with the Club led to a number of jobs, most notably technical director of the Greenwich Village Theatre in 1917, where the first production of *The Chester Mysteries* was staged, and eventually in 1919 staged at Hart House theatre, a haven for like-minded theosophists and artists such as Mitchell, Lawren Harris, and Merrill Denison. With the arrival of the 1920s, membership in the TTS grew to nearly two hundred. By this time Mitchell had become a crucial member of the society, assuming an executive role in 1920 in the then newly formed Canadian section. He founded the Blavatsky Institute in 1924, the publishing arm of the society, and assumed the role of the TTS's most charismatic spokesman throughout its most fruitful period.

By no means a homogenous system of belief, the various factions of theosophy nevertheless abide by its three principles, composed by H.P. Blavatsky: (1) To form a nucleus for the universal brotherhood of mankind without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour; (2) to encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science; (3) to investigate unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man [*sic*] (Mitchell, *Theosophy* 8).⁶ In *Theosophy in Action* Mitchell underscores their importance as “the trinity of essentials without which no Theosophical work can thrive” (8). It can be said that both *Creative Theatre* and *The Chester Mysteries* embody these principles.

The oft-cited use of the translation of theosophy into its literal meaning, “divine wisdom,” as an all-purpose definition for theosophy was a source of frustration for Mitchell, who wrote, “Any religious system purports to be [divine wisdom ... In contrast, theosophy] is “the wisdom of the god,” that wisdom which man may make manifest by virtue of the fact that he has in the past attained to a far higher measure of divinity than he now displays” (*Exile* 93). As this quotation shows, Mitchell was in complete accordance with

H.P. Blavatsky's critique of industrialization and scientific materialism—in particular regarding the work of Charles Darwin. For Mitchell, the apologists for evolution, such as the “evolutionary mythologists” he critiques in *The Exile of the Soul*, “are pledged to the idea that evolution is the only true theory of man on earth, and no matter what the facts, they will bring in their predetermined verdict” (82).

The materialist notion of the primacy of physical evolution contravenes the teachings of theosophy, which advances the existence of ancient writings by equally ancient and enlightened masters who represent the “wisdom of the god,” who are spiritually evolved far in advance of their adherents. It also conflicts with Blavatsky's theory of the “double evolution of the human race” in which the Sons of Wisdom “had become ‘intellectual’” through a Promethean “contact with matter” (2: 96). For Blavatsky, the progress of technology and the rise of positivism and materialism in the nineteenth century were a potentially fatal step back from the *dharma* of humanity.⁷ Mitchell agreed with her assessment: “The theosophist of any school would say [...] that man in his present state is not proceeding serenely in his ascent.” He also wrote, “Somewhere in the past he has made a choice which is now impeding his progress” (*Exile* 97). For Mitchell, it is the “refusal to admit the materiality of any other planes than the physical” (29) that presents the greatest obstacle to humanity's *dharma*, which prevents humans from attaining a “far higher measure of divinity.” He concludes: “[i]t is not a problem of evolution that faces the soul, and still less of a problem of hastening evolution. It is a problem of *resumption*, of recovery of atrophied powers long since evolved and now forgotten” (47).

This notion of the need for the resumption and the recovery of the soul of humanity, and therefore a return to the understanding of “truth,” is a recurring motif in Mitchell's work in theatre before and during the 1920s. It is especially clear in *The Chester Mysteries*. In *Theosophy in Action* he writes that “the source of *Theosophia* [divine thought] is in the soul, and we will develop by practice the faculty of eliciting it” (35; italics in original). In *Creative Theatre* he writes, “If the theatre is an art it must tower into the clouds as every other art does, to become at last inseparably bound up in the secret of the soul of man” (11). For Mitchell the theatre, in particular the work of the actor, was the primary medium in which to practice and to elicit the secret of the soul, to “initiate its devotees” (7) and most importantly to educe the *paradosis*. In Mitchell's “Creative Theatre” the actor becomes “a kind of

priest," a "rhapsode and the celebrant of a mystery which is the theatre's own" (10). It is through the proper expression of the living, secret "soul" by the actor/priest that the resumption and the recovery of the *paradosis*, lost in the mechanized stage of the material world, will be facilitated.

In their respective articles, Mavor Moore and Renate Usmiani presume that Mitchell's primary critique in *Creative Theatre* focuses on the economic and social "commercialism" of theatre. While he does rage against the material repercussions of profit-centered theatres, his objections run deeper. He writes that "commercialism is not a disease. It is a *symptom*. It is only a late manifestation of an error in vision and a proximate cause of degeneration" (29; italics added). In *Creative Theatre* he takes what he calls the "greedy men," the "napoleon" and the "padrone" of the theatre syndicates to task, who crush "Sophia," the feminine, tremulous spirit of his "creative theatre." "Men made her a business," Mitchell writes, "Nobody woos her now. She solicits" (122). The analogy is clear: theatre, theosophy, or divine wisdom personified, once the highest expression of communion and initiation in the pre-industrial world, now prostitutes herself, "squatting monstrous and dirt-stained" in the city streets (122). Mitchell's use of the goddess, a controversial figure in both Christian and Jewish traditions (in particular the "occult" traditions of Gnostic Christianity and Jewish Cabalism) is a clear sign to the reader to perceive a much deeper meaning to his "creative" theatre and a much more pernicious error that the commercial theatre manifests.

According to Mitchell, this "error in vision" began with the dominance of *mechanistic monism* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Monism originated from the principles of Cartesian mechanism, which, according to Mitchell, "saw the body as a complex of chemical apparatus, of pipes, pumps, retorts, levers, etc., etc., and interpreted soul as an illusion growing out of the activity of these" (*Exile* 12). He writes that "[t]he monist posits a body that can by physico-chemical action explain all functions from the simplest chemical ones up to (and for some monists including) the functions of thought" (13). For Mitchell, monism negatively influenced biology, mathematics, psychology, and theatre, leading all three disciplines to assume that all functions of the body and the human experience are governed by mere flesh and chemicals.

Monism was an anathema to Mitchell's conception of a "creative" theatre and to theosophy. H.P. Blavatsky wrote that "[m]atter is the vehicle for the manifestation of soul on this plane

of existence, and soul is the vehicle on a higher plane for the manifestation of spirit [...]” (1: 49); to claim that the journey began and ended with mere matter was unthinkable. What Henri Bergson called the *élan vital* was necessary in the ascendancy of humanity into higher wisdom, and the body a necessary conduit for that ascent: both are also necessary in the creation and the experience of Art. In his article “Theosophy and Art,” Lawren Harris discusses “intuition or spiritual intelligence,” which is “the life of the soul as distinct from that of the person [...]. It is an attitude, not a code or creed, nor a scheme or theory [...]. It is an attitude which discloses the memory of the divine in us” (161). For Mitchell, “attitude” was not only an outlook, but a posture, a physical stance; the body and the mind disclosed the memory of the divine in concert.

Mitchell believed that the soul was a captive of the body, a ghost in the machine: “the Ego is living in the body of an animal and is compelled to see the world through the sensory and sensational mechanism of an animal” (*Exile* 37). The “Divine Ego,” the source of spiritual intelligence, the vessel for performance, exists within this mechanism. In *The Exile of the Soul* Mitchell writes, “the functions of the soul are reflective, volitional and conscious [i.e. intelligent] whereas the phenomena of the body are automatic, involuntary and unconscious.” In working out how the soul finds expression, Mitchell claims that “there is a vital (or psychic factor) between the thinking soul and the physical body by means of which the body is governed and directed” (*Exile* 12; italics added). Performance, then, becomes a function of the soul consciously governing the “pipes, pumps, retorts” and levers to express the “truth” of humanity, a medium in which to work to release the memory of the divine in both performer and spectator.

Mitchell argued that this vital principle, the “memory of the divine” as expressed in the theatre, was embodied specifically in the principle of *motion*. He writes, “[m]otion itself is the peculiar and exclusive property of the theatre which can by the use of the human body, the most plastic and expressive of forms, embody its miracle” (*Creative* 157). The problem is, of course, that the soul is compelled to express itself (if it can at all) through the body, an “automatic, involuntary and unconscious” mechanism. The solution lies first in the soul’s ability to *govern and direct* the body, to train the body in the art of motion to become the “visible, plastic medium of revelation” needed for *paradisis*; to bring about the “lightning flash of communion.” The successful actor, then, becomes a priest of the mysteries, the rhapsode of the miracle, and a celebrant of Sophia (the goddess of wisdom); such a role requires

a particular and rigorous discipline, far removed from the constraints of acting in the commercial theatre.

In privileging the function of motion in theatre, Mitchell allied himself with such contemporaries as director E.G. Craig and Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. He also resisted the tendency of Naturalist and Realist forms not only to favour the work of Stanislavski, but also to assume the preeminence of the playwright. Indeed, Mitchell requires the work of the playwright to defer to the supremacy of motion. For him it is necessary that “the author show in his words that they are born of his having understood characters doing things instead of saying things,” and “if the actor is required to say something which is merely funny or merely beautiful but neither generates nor explains funny motion or beautiful motion, we can mark that as not belonging to the theatre” (*Creative* 177).

For Mitchell, “[t]he great script written by a great artist of the theatre is only the matrix for a greater and more dynamic thing than itself” (*Creative* 165). The “scripts” for the Chester plays, extant from the fifteenth century, form the matrix of his theatre-as-church. He writes, “Our people know there is an altar to the Unknown God somewhere behind things, persons, ideas, because they have worshiped it so long” (6). That altar has the “power to transmute, to change values, to polarize anew, to order processes and to remove defilement” (7). Like The Book of Dyzan in Blavatsky’s “Secret Doctrine,” Mitchell’s “Creative Theatre” appeals to an ancient, unifying source; it presupposes the existence of a practice that long predates industrialization and materialism, and a practice that resists the “mythology” of evolutionary theory, thereby removing or dismissing the “defilement” of the modern world.

In the case of *The Chester Mysteries*, the theatre is literally the altar. Mitchell’s stage directions call for a stage that suggests “a church chancel. At the back is a tall stained glass window and in front of it an altar with candelabra and a bowl of lilies [...]. In the places required in the plays and in the intervals between the plays there is plain-song for choir and organ” (Conroy and Mitchell 6). In the minimalism of the design there is the suggestion of timelessness, which was discerned by an unnamed reviewer for the *Toronto Sunday World*, who wrote of the “admirable simplicity” of the set, which “gave us the mind of the fourteenth century in terms that are almost identical with our own” (“Chester”). This space out of time becomes the altar of transmutation; the blank canvas for the disciple of motion to become the manifestation of spirit.

Mitchell argues for four kinds of motion, three of which “we

have so long believed to be the whole motion of the theatre” and “are after all not facts in themselves but symbols and that the fourth is the only fact—the power the three must serve” (*Creative* 190): (1) “motion from one place to another as required for the interaction of the figures in the play”; (2) the “axial,” or “posture,” which “is contained within the single actor” (186); and (3) the “gesture proper,” which includes “facial expression and all the vast range of movement [...]. Separated thus from posture it is peculiarly the index of mind.” The fourth, “not visible in the body,” is “a swirl of force within the actor [...]. When it is active in him he compels attention. It is the power by which an actor draws or relinquishes the spectator’s interest” (187). An actor who can properly govern and direct the body to control this “vortex” stands as the “oracle” for the miracle of the theatre: the *paradosis*. Mitchell writes,

[H]e moves a muscle, he lifts a hand, he gathers himself together, he turns, he walks, and the intensity with which he holds the spectator is measured by the intensity with which he can project this divine [or psychic] energy into the specific thing he does. (189-90)

Motion, then, is the vital principle, the psychic factor by which communion between body and soul is achieved, and communion between writer, director, designer, actor and audience is realized. For Mitchell, this “re-creating instant” lies in a “swirl of force within the actor,” who, in utilizing the whole palate of movement, “turning, gathering the body for to-and-fro motion, the degree of erectness, the successive angles presented to the audience, the starting, stopping, sitting, rising, leaning, as well as all the relative positions of head, trunk and legs,” functions as the “oracle,” the medium who brings life to the work of the dramatist, the director and the designer (187), who channels the intent of the theatre makers to the audience.

The effect and perhaps the success of Mitchell’s concept of motion are found in the review for the 1919 production of *The Chester Mysteries* in the *Toronto Sunday World*. In it, the anonymous reviewer describes the beginning of the play:

[With] stately, reverential steps, a white-robed priest moved up the long aisle to the high altar, and, *turning*, spoke in grave and measured, full-voiced tones the words of the expositor. The gesture was magical. The atmosphere was created. The audience was under the spell from that moment. (“Chester”; italics added)

In this account we can detect Mitchell's conception of motion, especially in the description of the *turn* of the actor, the "magical" gesture, the swirl of force that held the audience spellbound. Mitchell's work in this area closely resembles the work of Eugenio Barba, who speaks of recurring principles, which, when applied to certain physiological factors (weight, balance, the position of the spinal column, the direction of the eyes in space), produce physical, "pre-expressive" tensions. These new tensions generate a particular quality of energy, rendering the body theatrically "decided" and "alive"; in so doing they manifest the performer's "presence," or scenic bios, attracting the spectator's attention before any verbal message is transmitted. The central difference is that while Barba considers this energy purely physical, Mitchell sees it as divine, even psychic.

With this kind of theatre, Mitchell suggests, "we might recover style, magnificence. We might recover a theatre of suggestion, of implication, of noble persuasion, of indices to inner forces. We might recover even initiation" (*Creative* 190). Most importantly for Mitchell, the *paradosis* recovers "the vague memory of a truth [the audience] once held but has forgotten and cannot quite recall." With that recollection, we will begin the journey back to a forgotten divinity, to correct the error of modernity and resume our spiritual evolution. He writes,

When we learn to create in motion, inner as well as outer, we will cease our dull imitations of joy; we will create joy [...]. We will make jealousy, hatred, gayety, love—all these in spirit as the other arts do. This will be modern. Not the externals of modernity—factories, skyscrapers, steel girders and wheels, robots, ductless glands, carbolic and formaldehyde—but the ancient and ever-new creative function. What we do will be original because we take it up into the realm of our origin and originate it—mint it again for new issue. (*Creative* 192-193)

The "spell" of Mitchell's *Chester Mysteries* may have satisfied the audience to some extent, especially those who prefer a more contemplative, liberal and mystical Christianity—a preference which many members of the TTS shared—but whether or not the *paradosis* was achieved is debatable. Certainly it satisfied some expectations for aesthetic beauty. "The grouping and movements of the shepherds," the *Toronto Sunday World* critic writes, "have been arranged so as to make a series of effective pictures, excellent both in color and arrangement." The critic adds, "[E]verything

possible has been done to bring out all [of the play's] beauties. The tableaux arranged are like a series of striking pictures" ("Chester").

What is left out in this description, as with Mavor Moore's and Renate Usmiani's analyses of Mitchell's work, is the presence of the divine. Mitchell's vortex is reduced in these assessments to a series of stylizations and lighting effects. One might argue that monist worldviews are being applied to a performance resistant to monism, but it might also be that Mitchell's critics are not entirely incorrect in their conclusions. For all its apparent simplicity, *The Chester Mysteries*, like most of his productions, shouldered an impossible ambition, one that even the intensity of the white-robed priest could not bear.

For Mitchell, his work with motion in the theatre represented a small part of an immense intellectual project that combined a multitude of disciplines for a specific end. It represented one element of a much larger theosophical undertaking that fuelled his "creative" theatre and his work within the ideals of the "whole world" and the "whole culture" in which he lived. He sought to free humanity from the pumps and levers of monism and return to it the world of the soul, the realm of the *paradosis* that the modern world appeared to have rejected. Theosophy was not a part of Mitchell's life—it was his life, and theatre was the medium by which he sought to initiate others into his vision. "It's a dream? Of course it's a dream," he writes, "But all institutions are the coming to pass of dreams" (*Creative* 126-27). Mitchell failed to realize his institution physically, but in his writing he realizes the dream in the mind's eye of the reader, in the hopes that his impossible theatre would one day inspire "new and nobler dreamers" (127). ❀

NOTES

- 1 It is interesting to note that theosophy wasn't the only alternative to the dominant presence of Christian traditions. The presence of other Occult traditions, though significantly smaller in size, was also felt in Canada in this period. According to Gregory Betts,

Theosophy was only one occultist manifestation in Canada amidst a broad field of activity during a period that included a dramatic rise in the public activities of the Freemasons, the Rosicrucian Order, the Foresters, and countless other smaller, more and less esoteric societies, cults, and applied study groups [...]. Occultist activity within the artistic community in Canada during the period in question included Christian mysticism, Cabbalism, Black Magic Satanism, Primitivism, Deism, Animism,

Demonology and countless other configurations and spiritualist affiliations—all of which encouraged artists to document and propagate their esoteric values. (63)

While “[t]he concerns of these groups were inevitably diverse, and to no great extent did their religious—let alone their aesthetic—beliefs form a coherent, pan-occultist creed” (Betts 63), theosophy drew inspiration (and members) from many of these groups. However, largely due to issues of social standing, close relations between Theosophists and Freemasons, many members of which were upstanding citizens in their community, were forged early on. In Canada, Alfred Smythe, founder of the Toronto Theosophical Society (TTS) adopted several elements of Freemason organization early on, including the use of the term “lodge” into the structure of the TTS. Mitchell himself was initiated into the Ashlar Lodge of Toronto in 1910, went on to ascend to the eighteenth degree of the Scottish Rite and become a lifetime member of the St. George lodge in Toronto. Mitchell’s book *Through Temple Doors: Studies in Occult Masonry* signified his commitment to the way of Freemasonry.

- 2 The sections included in Mitchell’s production were “The Sheaphardes’ Play,” “The Offering of the Sheaphardes,” and “The Adoration of the Magi.”
- 3 Included in his papers at York University is a collection of notes which he entitled “Varia: A First Notebook of the Theatre.” It contains many of the ideas and references found in *Creative Theatre*, and even includes sentences and paragraphs published in the final draft of the book. The first date marked is 18 September 1921. Underneath the date Mitchell writes that “[t]his notebook has been carried along in various forms for some years, but with very little continuity,” suggesting that these ideas stem from a much earlier date.
- 4 According to Shankara, radical monism allows for the existence of an original first principle (or what occultists call “the Causeless Cause,” the “Eternal” and the “Unknowable” reality) of a divine or spiritual nature. However, adherents deny the existence of a personal absolute reality standing apart from the rest of the universe. According to the monist, there is only one reality that includes in its being all finite reality as well as divine reality with no distinction between the two. All of reality consists of only this one absolute principle. This idea connects to an important concept in Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, which is the notion of *maya*, or illusion. She writes, “[n]othing is permanent except for the one hidden absolute existence which contains in itself the *noumena* [after Kant, the realm of the radically unknowable, as opposed to observable phenomena] of all realities” (1: 39).
- 5 For example, in a lecture given in 1920 for the Toronto Theosophical Society (TTS) and reprinted in *The Canadian Theosophist*, A.M. Stephen makes the claim that theosophy’s origins reach back three hundred years before the birth of Christ to when a society was

formed “at Heliopolis, in Egypt, by Pot Amun, priest of the sun” (Stephen 2). While dubious at best, such an assertion reinforces the notion that some theosophists sought (and seek) to trace the ancestry of theosophy to pre-Christian mystery cults.

- 6 In its formative years the TTS had found itself embroiled in the numerous battles of international theosophy, including, among others, the great “schism” of 1895 in which William Q. Judge broke away from the central organization, led by Annie Besant (1847-1933) after the death of Blavatsky, to form an American section of the society. The TTS itself had also survived the formation of a local splinter group called the “Beaver” Branch or Lodge, formed soon after the schism in allegiance with the newly formed American section, and eventually disbanded sometime in 1900. By 1909 the TTS had also hosted the lecture tours of the major figures of international theosophy, including Besant, Katherine Tingely (1847-1929), and Charles Leadbeater, who often spoke to packed houses in Toronto. By the time of Mitchell’s arrival, the TTS had proven itself to be an important and fiercely independent chapter, maintaining a loyalty to the original teachings of Blavatsky, resisting the many amendments to the society made by Besant and Leadbeater, and remaining autonomous despite facing ongoing pressure to conform to the American section by Judge and, later on, Tingely. Mitchell would work to reinforce its independence and to widen its scope.

Numerous sects adhering to different aspects of the system cropped up early and often, though they continued to share common principles and texts. The central division was between those who adhered to the American School and those who held fast to the “Adyar” School (referring to the location in India of the world headquarters of the Theosophical Society that literally and ideologically housed Blavatsky, Olcott, and Besant). In contrast to the American school (Judge and Tingely), which favoured occultist practices derived from the Western tradition, including such sources as Cabbalism and Hermeticism, the “Adyar” school adopted such “Eastern” philosophies as Hinduism and Buddhism as their primary sources and believed in a race of “masters” who divulged their wisdom primarily to Blavatsky (and, later on, to Besant). Again, however, both schools shared common philosophies. Albert Smythe, for example, was introduced to theosophy by way of Judge, and his devotion to Indian philosophy and therefore to Adyar in particular was keenly felt in the TTS. (Smythe, however, was not beyond critiquing Besant and Leadbeater, albeit with great care.) This is especially evident in the pages of the *Canadian Theosophist*, in which articles on *karma*, *yoga* (the spiritual and not the physical practice, which was considered too dangerous for Westerners), and *dharma* often appeared, and translations of original Indian texts were published (McCann 200). In particular, the journal embraced what Gillian McCann has cited as the most influential system in this brand

of theosophy, the [Advaita] *Vedanta* of the Indian religious philosopher Shankara (204), which advocated “radical monism, and belief in reincarnation and *karma*” (203).

- 7 *Dharma* is a complex term that is found in numerous religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. As a follower of esoteric, or Vajrayana Buddhism, Blavatsky defined *dharma* as a set of teachings that open the way to enlightenment. In her own understanding *dharma* also refers to the divine destiny of all those who adhere to theosophical beliefs.

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