

## INTRODUCTION: PERFORMING INTERCULTURAL CANADA

Guest Editor: Ric Knowles

Theatre and performance in the land that is now called Canada, apart from sacred and still private rituals unique to specific First Nations, has always been intercultural. Even among pre-contact First Nations, ceremonies such as the potlatch among the nations of the west coast were designed to negotiate difference and facilitate trade. Contact itself is easily imagined as performative, as European “explorers” and “discoverers” encountered the (to them) inconvenient existing inhabitants of Turtle Island (a space they preferred to construe as empty) through mutually misunderstood ritual exchange and enacted devastatingly imbalanced, ultimately genocidal versions of one-sided, appropriative interculturalism. Since contact, all public performance in Canada has involved performatively constituting and negotiating subjectivities that have inevitably been displaced, hybrid, or diasporic: between settler/invader cultures and First Nations, among subsequent waves and generations of immigration from increasingly diverse locations—even within and between the dominant, settler/invader cultures themselves.

The kind of interculturalism that has dominated critical theory internationally since the interculture wars of the 1980s in the work of scholars such as Patrice Pavis and Erika Fischer-Lichte, on the one hand, and Rustom Bharucha and Una Chaudhuri on the other, is the appropriative type practised by western interculturalists such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Eugenio Barba, who like their modernist predecessors have drawn upon decontextualized elements of othered cultures in their attempts to rejuvenate decadent western theatrical forms.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, some of this type of analysis has belatedly accrued around the similarly appropriative intercultural work of Robert Lepage and his use of “the orient” in productions such as *The Dragon’s Trilogy*, *Seven Streams of the River Ota*, and *Zulu Time* (see Fricker; Harvie). But critical discussion of performance across cultures has been relatively late coming to Canada. This is perhaps due to the fact that the practice of official multiculturalism, adopted in 1971 and entrenched in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, relegated arts outside of the “charter” French and English cultures to non-professional status, funding it through the Multiculturalism Directorate until as late as 1991, when the arts councils officially recognized non-western cultural produc-

tion as art rather than merely static “ethnic” folklore, to be “preserved” (in the terms of Bill C-93, the 1982 Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada) rather than nurtured. With (limited) access to public support, theatre and performance began in the final decade of the twentieth century to crawl out from the community centres and ethnic ghettos of official multiculturalism and register its presence in the professional theatres from which it had been for the most part absent in Canadian theatre’s post-1967 nationalist phase, and where it might attract critical and scholarly attention.

An archetypal example of the trajectory followed by many “ethnic” theatre artists and companies is Toronto’s Carlos Bulosan Theatre Company. Founded by the late Fely Villasin in 1982 as the Carlos Bulosan Cultural Workshop, the company began as an amateur community theatre mounting shows that consolidated immigrant Filipino identities and largely addressed problems faced by Filipino immigrants to North America. These included work such as *Carding* (1984), about a Filipino immigrant to Canada; *If My Mother Could See Me Now* (1989), about Filipina domestic workers in Canada; *Carlos Bulosan* (1992), about the life and work of a Filipino immigrant to the US; *Home Sweet Home* (1993), about violence against women in the Filipino-Canadian community; *Noong Kapanahunan...Not on My Time* (1994), about the ever popular subject among immigrant communities, the generation gap; and so on. When its artistic direction passed from its founder to her daughter, Nadine Villasin, Carlos Bulosan began its evolution into a fully professional company, its first professional production being *Miss Orient(ed)* in 2003. In 2008 Carlos Bulosan marked its coming of age by producing *People Power* as part of the regular season at that bastion of Canadian nationalism, Theatre Passe Muraille, with funding from the federal, provincial, and municipal arts councils. Carlos Bulosan is part of a growing, rhizomatic, and interdependent intercultural theatre ecology in Toronto and Canada. Its web site provides links to those of Toronto’s Native Earth Performing Arts and fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company, Montreal’s South Asian (but broadly intercultural) Teesri Duniya Theatre, and of course Toronto’s intercultural Cahoots Theatre Projects—and these links are symbolic of the genuine connections across a growing network. There are many more artists and companies from minoritized communities across Canada who are working together in a kind of cross-cultural solidarity to challenge the hegemony of whiteness on the country’s stages and performatively to forge new subjectivities and communities in diaspora.

This does not mean that these artists, companies, and communities are operating on a playing field that is equal with one another or with that of the mainstream. There is a long way to go in terms of funding structures, access, “multicultural” policies and practices, flexible organizational structures, and other determinants that can work to shape and contain work that exceeds the definitional constraints currently in place, constraints that favour recognizable western theatrical forms and practices. But all of these are in the process of being challenged “from below,” as it were, as a wide variety of communities claim the right performatively to seize control of their own representation and development.

This special double issue of *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches théâtrales au Canada* focuses on some of this work, and although not all of the papers collected here explicitly address work across cultures, all of them acknowledge the intercultural as a fact of life in contemporary Canada. Theatre and performance in Canada are no longer intercultural because of misguided “colourblind casting” (which negates difference) or the raiding of othered cultural forms by dominant-culture directors and theatre companies. They are no longer intercultural by virtue of minoritized groups providing the thrill of exoticism for audiences who are either mainstream (attending the “diversity slots” of large theatres) or slumming. In the twenty-first century theatre and performance in Canada aren’t even intercultural by virtue of what is represented on stage or what passes between stage and auditorium. In the performance ecology of a country that has always been constituted by diverse, displaced, and uprooted peoples, theatre is intercultural in today’s Canada *within* audiences, who come together across multiple cultural differences in part to negotiate individual and community identities. Perhaps the new question, adjusting Northrop Frye’s “Where is Here?” in his Conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* in 1965, is “Who is Here?”

The answer, perhaps, is everyone. Not all of the artists and companies that are constituting Canadian interculturalism are represented here, but among those who *are* represented in this special issue, as authors and subjects of the essays, are English Canadians, African Canadians from all over the world, Czechs and a Czech Canadian, a Lebanese Québécois, an Argentinean Canadian, a Chilean Canadian, a Canadian Australian, an American Canadian, a female Canadian researcher of Jewish-Russian origin working across three languages, various Anishnaabe and a Dene-Métis, a Newfoundlander, and the disabled. And that doesn’t include the characters who populate the plays under discussion, who take us

further afield to, among other places, Chile, Japan, probably Lebanon, and the US.

The issue also includes many different approaches to the intercultural, which I prefer to terms such as the cross-, multi-, meta-, extra-, trans-, pre-, post-, or ultracultural because it seems to me important to focus on the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures, spaces that can function as performative sites of negotiation. And most of the essays published here pay close attention to such spaces. Three of the papers began life in the context of the fourth AfriCanadian Playwrights Festival and Conference in 2006, and not surprisingly these focus in various ways on African Canadian drama. But each of George Elliott Clarke, Joanne Tompkins, and Jerry Wasserman knows that to be African Canadian is to exist in what Clarke here calls “a kind of African United Nations.” “Diversity,” as he says, “thy name is African Canada.” Focusing on otherwise very different plays by Caribbean Canadian playwright anthony and “Africadian” Louise Delisle, Clarke, himself an award-winning playwright, librettist, and poet whose work is discussed elsewhere in this issue, finds sites of “symposia” in the plays’ hair salons and kitchens where these intercultural differences can be brought into conversation with one another.

If for Clarke the theatre is the site of symposia for African Canadian playwrights, for Joanne Tompkins it is an intertwined national and extra-national “diaspora space,” an extended space of belonging for a diverse, intercultural group of African Canadian subjects. Examining plays by Andrew Moodie, Lorena Gale, and George Elroy Boyd, Tompkins explores the characters’ negotiations among themselves and between invisibility and hypervisibility as African Canadians within urban communities. Each of the plays she examines presents the difficulty of locating or constituting African Canadian subjectivities, each illustrates different ways of locating identity in place, and each contests conventional Canadian boundaries and histories by constructing alternative diaspora spaces with varying degrees of solidarity across multiple subject positions.

Jerry Wasserman’s route to the intercultural is through the already multiple aesthetic of the blues, which Houston Baker calls “a web of intersecting, criss-crossing impulses” of the kind, perhaps, that constitute symposia and diaspora spaces in Clarke’s and Tompkins’s formulations. Focusing on George Elliott Clarke’s *Whylah Falls: The Play*, George Elroy Boyd’s *Gideon’s Blues*, Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, and Andrew Moodie’s *The Lady Smith* as “blues plays,” Wasserman traces their adoptions and adaptations of an African American musical form to “conjure a diasporic

AfriCanadian poly-consciousness” that provides valuable tools in exploring Black Canadian lives.

Beyond these three AfriCanadian essays, this special issue continues to provide a variety of takes on the performance of an increasingly intercultural Canada. Barry Freeman finds, in what he calls “collaborative intercultural theatre” (involving the international, intercultural collaboration of divergent groups), that the creation process itself functions as a forum in ways comparable to the operation of symposia, diaspora space, and the blues aesthetic in the plays analysed by Clarke, Tompkins, and Wasserman. Stepping back from the dominant (inter)semiotic approach to intercultural performance analysis, he considers the Prague-Toronto-Manitoulin Theatre project (PTMTP) through the lens of postmodern (post-James Clifford) ethnography, and focuses neither on the product of the collaboration nor the meanings it produces for its audiences, but on the intercultural experience of the participants. The PTMTP involved a diverse body of students and a faculty member from University of Toronto’s Scarborough campus, a director and actors from Ypsilon Theatre in Prague, the Anishnaabe Artistic Director and members of De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig theatre on Manitoulin Island, and Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses as creative facilitator in a collaborative intercultural creation process issuing in productions presented to audiences in Prague, Toronto, and Manitoulin Island. Freeman hones in on a single scene, brackets off audience reception, and focuses usefully on the collaborative intercultural experience of those involved, particularly the performers.

Yana Meerzon very differently locates intercultural encounter, not within the social realm of bodies in real space, but within the exilic playwright him/herself—the bearer of the hyphen—and among the playwright, the *mise en scène*, and the audience. Following Rustom Bharucha, her essay focuses on the *intracultural* as applied to the exilic self “as a temporal and psychophysical venue where cultural contexts intersect.” This is to move the symposium inside, where the subject-in-exile functions as “a territory of multiple, unmarked discourses.” Her case study is the person and work of Lebanese-Québécois playwright Wajdi Mouawad. Meerzon focuses productively on Mouawad’s multivocal *mise en scène*, the formation of adolescent intercultural subjectivities in exile, and the processes of cultural creolization as “a manifestation of borderlessness, flexibility, and free movement between separate cultural, ethnic, and communal identities.”

Guillermo Verdecchia, like Clarke an award-winning playwright in his own right, shifts the ground of intercultural encounter

to the interface between the script and the technologies of theatrical production at a given site, including the venue, mandate, audience base, and history of the producing theatre, together with such things as the marketing discourses, posters, and “helpful” informational pages in the house program. Verdecchia explores this dynamic in the Tarragon Theatre’s 2006 production of Chilean Canadian Rosa Laborde’s play, *Léo*, which “draws on the complex (Chilean and Latino) cultural memory of the 1973 coup that deposed the Salvador Allende government.” He concludes, however, that the Tarragon production’s interculturalism is less than salutary, containing Latino cultural memory within the theatre’s own institutional discourses and memories of benign Canadian (multicultural) nationalism and naturalism, and evading questions of Canadian complicity in the quelling of the Allende regime. Verdecchia concludes that there is no easy path to the improved understanding held out as a potential product of intercultural performance and offers a useful *caveat* about what happens when what Marvin Carlson calls “the entire theatre experience”—including not simply what’s “in” the play, but the ways in which the play is discursively framed—is taken into account (xiii).

Like Verdecchia’s, Robin Whittaker’s essay concerns itself with cultural memory and with interculturalism at the levels of dramaturgy and ideology. In this case the concern is with the complex construction of chronotopic *intercultural* memories through the intersection of space and time. Whittaker focuses, following Bakhtin, on “the intrinsic interconnectedness of temporal and spatial relationships,” and his case study is the profoundly intercultural dramaturgy of Marie Clements’s *Burning Vision*, where “intercultural handshakes” encompassing Hiroshima, New Mexico, Port Radium, and elsewhere occur across spacetime in a form of “chronotopic dramaturgy” inspired by and structured through non-linear but profound Dene prophecy. In Whittaker’s reading, Clements’s polyvocal, intercultural voice grafts together temporal and ethnogeographic sites in ways that resist western historiographic and dramaturgical timekeeping—the policing of differences—and constitute reconnected timespaces that configure an entirely new transcultural dramaturgical form. The play reclaims indigenous temporal and spatial logics that were displaced by colonization and by linear western timekeeping and map-making.

Finally, Kirsty Johnston argues the case that disability, too, is an internally diverse interculture, and one that is constituted through performance. She works from the premises that disability is a complex identifier, inextricably linked to performance, and that

everyone is now engaged in various ways and degrees with a “poly-valent” disability culture in Canada, as internally diverse as are the African Canadian cultures studied by Clarke, Tompkins, and Wasserman. Johnston usefully extends the commonsensical usage of the intercultural to apply to intercultural performance across disability cultures at festivals in Calgary, Toronto, and Vancouver, and in efforts to establish a national network. Arguing that disability is both multiple and constituted through performance in the same ways as are race, ethnicity, class, and gender, Johnston valuably promotes a syncretized view of disability culture that takes root in processes of “intercultural dialogue.” “Disability,” clearly, exists on a continuum rather than inhabiting one side of an ability-disability binary, and its definitions and manifestations are performative rather than ontological. To consider disability cultures within the context of intercultural performance is to make a great leap forward in understanding both the performative nature of culture and the performative cultures of disability.

The essays included here not only examine intercultural production in the theatre; importantly, they also model intercultural scholarship. Although one part of Nova Scotian George Elliott Clarke’s essay deals with an Africadian playwright to whom he can claim kinship, and although Argentinian Canadian Guillermo Verdecchia, as a Latino Canadian can claim a relationship with his “object of study,” the Chilean Canadian Rosa Laborde, all of the essays included here work and negotiate across cultures through the relationship between the researcher and her or his subject. Intercultural scholarship is different from the traditional template. The scholar can no longer afford to assume “authority,” or to position herself as objective assessor of a passive “object of study” (any more than the ethnographer can position her objective gaze in relation to a static “other” culture). The essays included here deal with this problematic in different ways, but many of them position the researcher and scholar as collaborator with the body of cultural production that they study and that interacts actively with the community we all live in and in which we are all implicated. Most directly Freeman’s “postmodern ethnography” fully acknowledges the participatory role of the author himself in the work’s creation of new communities. But while the other authors participate less directly in the projects they are writing about, they too acknowledge a different relationship: as Whittaker does with the spacetime of Clements’s creation and meaning-making and the ambivalent relationship between western theorizing and Dene cosmology, as Johnston does in writing about a disability arts movement in which

her essay participates and to which it contributes, or as Meerzon does with the exilic condition in a transnational culture in which she is implicated: “I recognize and identify as my own,” she says, “these artists’ permanent need for negotiation of meaning and constant code-switching, as well as often a fear of being ‘lost in translation’” (Meerzon). This volume, then, both stages and participates in a larger symposium, as scholars join the conversations and negotiations that are taking place in the hair salons and kitchens, diaspora spaces and blues callaloes of a transformational, transnational performance culture within Canada. ❁

## NOTES

- 1 For an overview of the international theory and practice of intercultural performance, including its intersections with performance studies, postcolonial studies, critical multiculturalism studies, critical cosmopolitanism, critical race theory, and whiteness studies, see Knowles.

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