

SHERRILL GRACE AND JERRY WASSERMAN, eds.  
*Theatre and AutoBiography: Writing and Performing Lives in  
Theory and Practice.*  
Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2006; 352 pp.

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*Theatre and AutoBiography* is itself a work of autobiography. In the creation of this collection, editors Sherrill Grace and Jerry Wasserman have selected and reshaped the events of the past into a new narrative, which bears both the inescapable marks of this construction and the pervasive traces of the original experience. The genesis of this collection was an exploratory workshop in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia in February of 2004, bringing together an invited group of academics, theatre practitioners of all stripes, and drama publishers for “three intense days of debate, meals, wine, coffee, and theatre discussion, and to witness the kind of ephemeral, magic moments that can only happen with theatre” (11). The book then is a “collection of post-memories [that tries] to trace and recreate that event for our readers” (11). So, not only do the essays, interviews, and photographs assembled here arise from that original meeting as proceedings, but they also productively talk back to it, frequently describing particular moments and actively exploring the ways that those encounters then shaped the understanding of the writers. Taken together, the shared intent of the workshop and subsequent published collection is to describe and debate key issues arising out of the overlap of drama and biography/autobiography both in performance and in print. The diverse voices assembled here explore the frontiers of a large territory delineated by these paired fields, encompassing a range of auto/biographical subjects including historical figures, fictional characters, and most fruitfully, producing autobiography in a self-reflexive mode, the contributing auto/biographers themselves.

Grace and Wasserman’s collection is an important addition to the literature in this burgeoning field, carving out fresh territory in at least two ways. First, although this is not featured in the title, nor highlighted in the introduction, the collection has a distinctly Canadian focus, featuring Canadian scholars and practitioners and mostly (but not exclusively) dealing with Canadian subject matter. The only other comparable Canadian entry into this field is Julie Rak’s edited collection *Auto/Biography in Canada*

(2005), which incidentally omits discussion of dramatic literature or theatre. As evidenced by the title, Rak explicitly positions the book as Canadian and self-consciously asks, “why do a national collection?” (11). While *Theatre and AutoBiography* eschews overt identification as a national collection, it implicitly offers the same answers that Rak does. One, there is now a large body of dramatic work to write about, work that is rich in quantity but also in quality as many major playwrights have produced work with an auto/biographical orientation. And two, the key principle, regarding the performative nature of identity is central to drama as to other literary forms. “This is where discourses of auto/biography that are closely connected to the promise of authenticity are, in fact, connected to the idea of nation as a fiction about origins” (Rak 11). By bringing together both scholarly and performed work pertaining to these self-generating narratives, the book documents the mosaic of stories that constitute Canadian identity-in-the-making.

As Grace notes in her introduction, the last three decades have witnessed the rise of autobiography and biography. These genres have a long history, but it is only recently that they have become so ubiquitous. One reason for this is that “we live in a culture of *me* or *I* at a time when access to this cultural production is easy” (13). Digital technology linked to the internet facilitates as never before both creation and publication of autobiographical works. The title of the popular video sharing site really says it all about the autobiographical attitude of this application: YouTube. There are even new verbs to describe online life writing; one can *blog* thousands of words or *tweet* 140 characters. But technology is only part of the reason for this explosion of self narratives: “[a]uto/Biographies satisfy our desire for story at the same time as they promise to give us *truths* (if not Truth), to provide meaning, identity, and possibly even order, in an otherwise incoherent, arbitrary, and often violent world” (13). It is the interplay between these competing obligations that structure the majority of essays in this collection as they negotiate the relationship between the story we want and the history we are promised, between the necessarily fictionalized work of art and the grounded but obscured real world inspiration.

Among the essays that best exemplify the tension in auto/biography between the desire for a story and the promise to deliver truth is Ric Knowles’s essay tracing the relations between the performative construction of the subject through storytelling and the physicality of the body as “archive,” a concept derived

from Susan Bennett's essay "3-D A/B" in this same collection. Knowles draws examples from some of the best known Canadian autobiographical solo shows, including Ken Garnhum's *Pants on Fire*, George Seremba's *Come Good Rain*, and Djanet Sears's *Afrika Solo*, among others, to identify moments of "phenomenological frisson" when the audience is made acutely aware that the performer's body is the same body that experienced the events it is now recounting (56). Katherine McLeod also takes up this question of the duality between story and history but shifts the terrain of investigation from body to voice. MacLeod draws on Susanna Egan's theory of dialogic mirror talk to consider the constructive rather than reflective properties of the biographer/subject relationship. This is a fruitful application of the mirror talk concept to plays where the biographer and subject speak from one mouth. Whereas *Alien Creature* is a haunting or possession, allowing biographer-performer Linda Griffiths and biographical-subject Gwendolyn MacEwen both to speak, *The Occupation of Heather Rose* uses "multiple voices [to] acoustically perform a self in flux – a self that calls for a rethinking of mirroring itself" (98). Also gathered around the core of the book are Louis Patrick Leroux's essay on the process-driven autobiographical impromptu of Michel Tremblay; Joanne Tompkins extends the usual autobiographical territory of subject and storyteller to consider the role of the other in the construction of self in *The Shape of a Girl* and *A Line in the Sand*; and Louise Forsyth locates *La nef des sorcières* in the Popular Theatre tradition of using autobiographical performance to bring invisible social positions to visibility.

Maggie B. Gale, Ira Nadel, Ann Saddlemyer, and Paula Sperdakos are all eminent scholars in the field of autobiography and biography studies, and the omission of these names from this collection would be a serious loss. However, the essays produced by these writers, along with the one on Totem Theatre contributed by Denis Johnston, are outliers in terms of their direct engagement with the central autobiographical pairing of story and history. The shift in focus to the biographies and autobiographies of theatre people first struck me as out of character for this volume and others of this type, as the theatrical component of *Theatre and AutoBiography* became secondary to biographical research. Ultimately, however, I was converted, perceiving these essays as cohering around a second but related variation on the motif of story and history. Grace contextualizes this section, posing the question: "How does the biographer respect this

performativity while creating a life story that represents the theatre artist without taking the play(ing) for the life or reducing one to the pale facsimile of the other and both to a *tableau mort*?" (21). Moreover, although it is not the primary focus of these articles, in the spirit of Egan's mirror talk, each writer does take into account (some more than others) the situation of the biographer as also the autobiographer of her own experience in the biographical encounter. Grace's essay, which concludes this section on "Theatre Lives," is the most adept at bringing both the theatrical and the autobiographical to the fore, interweaving three separate strands: the fictional world of Sharon Pollock's play *Doc*, the autobiographical sources of Pollock's life translated into the play, and finally the autobiography of Grace's experience of being biographer to a playwright who is herself a self-reflexive miner of her own life. The shift in balance between theatre and auto/biography that permits the logical inclusion of these essays is what makes this collection truly unique, displaying a welcome catholicity in its interpretation of the extent of the territory encompassed by these two intersecting fields of study.

The last section of the book returns us to the stage as a site of autobiographical performance. As a follow up to the initial workshop events, Wasserman interviewed ten Canadian playwrights asking questions about the process of developing the work, about the intersection between oneself and the character, about the obligation—if any—to recreate "truth," and about how they view the associated ethical issues in such a performance. The participants are a virtual who's who of creators of auto/biographical work in this country: Linda Griffiths, Guillermo Verdecchia, Marie Clements, Sharon Pollock, Tomson Highway, R.H. Thomson, Sally Clark, Andrew Moodie, Joy Coghill, and Lorena Gale. The resulting statements are passionate and provocative, with the distinctive voice of each artist coming off the page. Taken as a whole, this is an important collection of first-person accounts, forming a unique comparative insight into the creation of autobiographical work. Also the inclusion of this section in the book is significant for providing a rare opportunity for the thoughtful reflections of artists to be published in conjunction with the more traditional academic writing. This tangible mixture of practice and theory was clearly a source of delight at the workshop and continues as one of the highlights of the book.

With one foot in theatre studies and one in autobiography studies, *Theatre and AutoBiography* (as its title asserts) certainly makes a timely contribution to both fields. It is, however, the

successful blending of theory and practice (as the subtitle promises) that makes this book a model for future publications.

**RIC KNOWLES**, ed.

*The Shakespeare's Mine: Adapting Shakespeare in Anglophone Canada.*

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009. x + 428 pp.

**LEANORE LIEBLEIN**, ed.

*A Certain William: Adapting Shakespeare in Francophone Canada.*

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009. xvi + 332 pp.

PETER KULING

Knowles's and Lieblein's paired collections of contemporary Canadian Shakespearean adaptations will no doubt become seminal anthologies in the rapidly growing field of adaptation criticism. Both editors encourage us to consider how these plays help Shakespearean drama "take on new meaning and [...] continue to be transformed" (Lieblein iv) through the adaptation process. Some Shakespeare and adaptation scholars may see these collections as only partial "first folios" of important Canadian adaptations—that is, as initial and necessarily incomplete anthologies that should spur further anthologization. New readers, however, and students particularly will relish new access to a wide variety of plays either out of print or not translated into English. Lieblein and Knowles focus on unique francophone and anglophone adaptations of both popular plays (*Othello*, *Hamlet*) and more uncommon examples (*Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*).

In highlighting the use-value of Shakespeare to Canadian playwrights, Knowles historicizes how "playwrights from a broad spectrum of backgrounds piggyback on [Shakespeare's] cultural capital, using his name to gain access and recognition" (iii). His collection starts with Ken Mitchell's *Cruel Tears* (1975), a prairie version of *Othello* replete with Ukrainian cultural intertexts and country music. Two radically different *Hamlet* adaptations follow: *Claudius* (1993) by Ken Gass and *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995) by Michael O'Brien. Gass focuses his adaptation on incestuous, domestic, and sexual politics, while O'Brien's "raw Viking world" (145) accentuates Scandinavian history and cultural claims to Shakespeare's most famous revenge tragedy.