

*Signatures of Our Past* constitutes a rich and comprehensive collection, demonstrating the differences and similarities between Canada and the United States in the dramatic creation and critical reception of cultural memory as a continuation of colonization, or a post-colonial enfranchisement.

**CANDIDA RIFKIND**

***Comrades and Critics: Women, Literature, & the Left in 1930s Canada***

Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2009. viii + 268 pp.

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Recipient of the Ann Saddlemyer scholarly book award at the 2010 conference of the CATR/ACRT, Candida Rifkind's *Comrades and Critics* expands the vital field of scholarship that is rewriting our knowledge and our analyses of left-wing Canadian modernism. In the 1930s, Canadian women writers and cultural workers including Dorothy Livesay, Ruby Ronan, Anne Marriott, Irene Baird, Toby Gordon Ryan, Mildred Goldberg, Elsie Park Gowan, Minnie Evans Bicknell, Mary Reynolds, and Jim (Jean) Watts made crucial contributions to English-Canadian communist and social democratic journalism, poetry, fiction, and theatre. Rifkind surveys this work in historical context and addresses its place in national cultural memory and its reception in English-Canadian literary history.

An introductory chapter on the "Socialist-Modernist Encounter" points to the "double duty of the English-Canadian literary left, to give creative expression to socialism and overturn the dominant literary tradition" (4), and goes on to frame the book's most original insights, which have to do with the gendered terms of the Socialist-Modernist encounter and its impact on the period's women artists and on their work. I would say, in my second-wave sort of way, that this book exposes the pervasive sexism of the most progressive discourses of English Canada in the 1930s. As Rifkind explains, the problem was not only that gender issues were explicitly subordinated to class and other struggles during the Comintern period, and then subordinated again in relation to the fight against fascism during the period of the Popular Front, although this did happen and it needs to be

remembered. (My own view, and I know that I am not alone in this, is that one of the most important lessons of the twentieth-century revolutions is that we humans must not ever again leave our humanity behind in order to “storm the barricades” and expect to be able to pick it up again on the other side. But I digress.) The problem is more acute because the explicit sidelining of gender issues in the 1930s was exacerbated by the discursive and symbolic linkages between rugged masculinity, socialist progress, and modernist aesthetics, on one hand; and femininity, a decadent and despised bourgeoisie, and bad art, on the other:

Women on the political left often had to subordinate questions of gender to those of class and ethnicity, and by the 1930s the gains made by pre-war socialist feminists and the suffrage movement of an earlier generation faltered (Newton 171). Across the Canadian left by the end of the 1920s, women's issues were being subordinated to class struggle and then, with the rise of European fascism in the early 1930s, fighting racisms and anti-Semitism at home and overseas. Women who were both socialists and modernists in 1930s Canada had to consequently find ways to accommodate themselves to the downplaying of women's issues in leftist politics and the contempt for any aesthetic perceived as feminine in modernist literature. Each of the women I foreground in this book struggled to do this in a different way; what unites them is an attempt to disassociate their female identities from the feminine metaphors and images typically used to criticize conservative artistic tradition as well as liberal bourgeois politics. (11)

Add to this the fact that real economic and political power was concentrated in the hands of men, and the discouragements and detours performed by these women artists seem merely inevitable. Rifkind rightly concentrates on their achievements.

Chapter One, “Revolution, Gender, and Third Period Modernism,” examines Dorothy Livesay's Third Period documentary socialist writing, largely published in *Masses* and characterized by her identification with the male working class. Her “exaltations of the heroic masculinity of industrial labour” (47) and her sexist and sectarian attacks on social democracy (53-54) read badly nowadays, given the revelations about Stalinism and the sea changes of the intervening decades. Livesay nonetheless remains a giant in the field. Chapter Two, “The Poet, the Public, and Popular Front Modernism,” details an artistic and political

reading of Anne Marriott's long poem *The Wind Our Enemy*, historicized in relation to the unfavourable and gender-coded contexts for the production and the reception of Marriott's writing, which have tended to reduce her place in Canadian literary history. Chapter Four, "The Novel and Documentary Modernism," focuses on Irene Baird's depression novel *Waste Heritage*, pointing up its "female-on-male gaze" (196) and reporting that the original title for this novel was the chilling "Plough These Men Under" (233).

Chapter Three, "Leftist Theatre and the Performance of Gender," is perhaps Rifkind's most exciting chapter, and the one of most interest to readers of *TRiC\RTaC*. Standing squarely on the shoulders of Alan Filewod, Rifkind examines the fascinating flowering of leftist theatre in Canada in the 1930s, pointing to the theatrical force of the non-English-language and "ethnic" theatres—Ukrainian, African, Finnish, Chinese, Yiddish, Swedish, Polish, and more—and threading her way through the smoke and mirrors surrounding the contributions of the Toronto-based Workers' Experimental Theatre and the phenomenon of *Eight Men Speak* by Oscar Ryan, E. Cecil-Smith, Fred Love, and Mildred Goldberg, with Toby Gordon Ryan playing the Canadian Labour Defence League Organiser who, like a modern-day Portia, leads the charge for justice. Rifkind's feminist reading of the play is refreshing and insightful. In addition, the chapter examines a number of other plays written or co-written by women: *Joe Derry* (1933) by Dorothy Livesay, *You Can't Do That* (1936) by William Irvine and Elsie Park Gowan, *Relief* (1937) by Minnie Evans Bicknell, and *And the Answer Is...* (1937) by Mary Reynolds.

To some extent, *Comrades and Critics* resembles the PhD dissertation it was not so very long ago, and, on second reading, I became more aware that certain terms, such as the "revolutionary chorus," are perhaps overused and may mask a need for further analysis. It might also have been a good idea to clarify better the differences between the periodization of the Canadian left developed by Ian McKay and that of the international communist movement, since the two distinct senses of the "Third Period" can be misleading or confusing. Having said that, I love this book, from the beginning right through to the last chapter, "New Formations," where Rifkind attempts to knit things together in a way that can account for our current sense of a "muddy liberal consensus" (215) and our hope for a way forward that will also allow us to remember our past.

## WORK CITED

Newton, Janice. *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left: 1900-1918*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2001.

**ROY, IRÈNE (dir., avec la collaboration de Caroline Garand et Christine Borello)**

*Figures du monologue théâtral ou Seul en scène*

Québec, Nota bene, coll. « Convergences » n° 35, 2007. 369 pp.

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Forme canonique ou genre distinct, du sermon joyeux médiéval aux monologies postdramatiques, le monologue est un riche et intrigant objet théâtral qui a récemment inspiré plusieurs colloques et publications.<sup>1</sup> Tenu à Québec en mai 2005, le colloque *Figures du monologue théâtral* « visait à mettre en lumière les dynamiques et les enjeux formels de l'utilisation du monologue, de même que le développement historique de grandes thématiques qui ont suscité son apparition, puis sa prise de possession progressive d'une bonne part de l'espace dramaturgique » (5). Issus de ce colloque, les textes en français et en anglais réunis dans l'ouvrage collectif dirigé par Irène Roy et publié aux éditions Nota bene en 2007 cherchent ainsi à cerner différentes « figures » du monologue autour de trois axes disparates, assez vaguement définis : « la scène contemporaine » (limitée en fait à des œuvres québécoises) ; les reprises et adaptations de *Hamlet* ; les « esthétiques successives qui ont jalonné l'histoire de l'art théâtral » (restreinte ici à l'histoire du théâtre français et québécois).

Comme beaucoup d'Actes de colloque, l'ouvrage se ressent de ce format initial, tant dans sa structure d'ensemble que dans la qualité des contributions, inégales en longueur aussi bien qu'en intérêt. Certains textes auraient gagné à être retravaillés pour la publication : l'analyse y est sommaire et la forme, très oralisée. Le travail de l'éditeur laisse aussi à désirer, car l'ouvrage contient de nombreuses coquilles et négligences dans la mise en forme, sans compter l'incongruité de 25 pages d'annexes peu utiles pour le texte de Jacqueline Razgonnikoff, déjà plus long que tous les autres. Les illustrations qui accompagnent plusieurs articles sont toutefois un atout appréciable. Alors qu'elles auraient pu composer une mosaïque diversifiée et stimulante, ces figures du