

**BRUCE BARTON, NATALIE CORBETT, BIRGIT SCHREYER DUARTE, and KEREN ZAIONTZ, eds.**  
*New Canadian Drama: Volume 9: Canadian Devised Theatre: Reluctant Texts from Exuberant Performance*  
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In 1993 when I began my apprenticeship as a performer, information in English on how the creative artists at the forefront of theatrical production actually worked was scarce. The few books authored by leading practitioners purposefully steered away from the nitty-gritty of procedures. Works by Barba, Brook, Chaikin, Grotowski, and Schechner mentioned the techniques of performance creation only obliquely. While leading composers of the same generation took pains to share their tools and conceptual approaches—consider the detailed writings of Cage, Feldman, Stockhausen, and Xenakis—the theatre makers kept their cards close to their chests. For those of us lucky enough to read French, *Les Voies de la création théâtrale* provided some respite, offering such wonders as the translated text of Kantor's *The Dead Class*, details of Barba's *Kaspariana* or an exhaustive analysis of Grotowski's *Constant Prince*. Today everything is different; videos of the major productions of the late twentieth century are widely available, practitioners author increasingly accessible manuals about their own work, and scholars situate contemporary practice in its local and international ecologies. The recent opus by John Nobbs of Australia's Frank Theatre, *A Devil Pokes the Actor*, provides an excellent example of the former, while Delgado and Rebellato's *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* offers the latter. To this party comes *Canadian Devised Theatre: Reluctant Texts from Exuberant Performance*, the kind of book I would have committed any number of sins to get my hands on twenty years ago, if only it had existed back then!

Volume 9 of the New Canadian Drama series (Borealis) edited by Bruce Barton, *Reluctant Texts* presents the scripts of four performances: *What the Thunder Said* by Bluemouth Inc. Presents, Boca del Lupo's *The Perfectionist*, *The Confessions of Punch and Judy* by Bobgan, Kowalchuk and Wells, and Robert Plowman's collaboration with Zuppa Circus Theatre *Radium City*. *Reluctant Texts* traces the theatre of original creation, currently referred to as 'devised theatre,' in a manner that aims to be both accessible and thorough. The scripts of each of the plays are

supplemented by introductory scholarly essays, thorough descriptions of staging, textual commentaries, storyboards, diagrams, musical scores, photographs, and extended artists' statements.

At the heart of this book is the relationship each editor draws between the material traces of the productions and the intentions, aspirations, and pragmatism revealed by the voices of the artists themselves. Keren Zaiontz's presentation of Bluemouth's *What the Thunder Said* is a skillful layering of accounts: what was said, how it was said, what was done, where it was done, and how the artists involved in creating it felt about it. The scripts and staging notes of two different productions of *What the Thunder Said* are placed side by side with artists' commentaries diverting and enriching the reader's progress. The subdivided and variegated pages of the account are a joy to navigate, revealing a new detail or a new path between details with each reading. Boca del Lupo's *The Perfectionist* as described by Birgit Schreyer Duarte continues this compelling presentation, which results, at least for me, in a fascinating suspension of temporal sequencing. While as a reader I know that the performance lies in the past, the inclusion of source materials, of sketches and comments from the gestation and creation of the piece leave me happily unconcerned that I have missed it and rather give me the sense the work is continuing somewhere in some fortuitous 'fourth time' beyond the past, present, and future.

I have not seen either *What the Thunder Said* or *The Perfectionist* but I attended Bobgan, Kowalchuk and Wells's *Confessions of Punch and Judy* and a staged reading of Plowman and Zuppa Circus's *Radium City*, to which these chapters certainly do justice, at the Catskill International Festival of New Theatre produced by NaCl Theatre in Highland Lake, New York. While Natalie Corbett's account of *Punch and Judy* is the least eclectic composition in the book, her introductory essay shares the strength of that script's simplicity. Her reflections on the levels of language, both verbal and non-verbal, developed in conversation with artists Ker Wells and Raymond Bobgan offer mature consideration of the processes of communication between creative collaborators and between a work and its audiences.

The final script, *Radium City* is as baroque as *Punch and Judy* is contained. Taking up over a third of the entire book, Plowman and Zuppa Circus provide a tremendous amount of detailed material, introduced at length by Bruce Barton. Zuppa Circus director Alex McLean's essay stands out in its clarity, bringing the

reader up to date on the history of his artistic preoccupations and procedures and on the nature of the work Zuppa Circus was attempting in their collaboration with Plowman. Barton's introduction is a great complement to all the material presented; it is densely packed with detail and enthusiasm and, while this much information might run the risk of overwhelming the reader, it more than makes up for its torrential output through the seriousness and care with which Barton treats the artists he is presenting. Plowman's scene-by-scene introductory notes serve to illuminate the vast and rambling plot and provide the reader with the decision-making process behind the actual script. The print used in this part of the book is much smaller than elsewhere, probably in order to get all the material in. It was certainly worth it, but I had to squint for much of this section—adding another ten or so pages to the book and increasing the size of the font would be much appreciated in a future edition!

I enjoyed and learned much from this book. I fervently believe there should be many more such volumes—we certainly have the artists to fill them! Nevertheless there is one assertion in the work that I truly don't agree with. While one might make a case that the theatre of original creation is relatively new and unusual to English Canadian audiences, it is important to remember that what we are now calling 'devised' theatre has been a staple of international art theatre since the late 1960s and as such is a major part of world theatre culture. Canadian scholars and artists have a responsibility to be familiar with such work, and with how it functions historically and in the present in Canada, Quebec, and internationally. Characterizing the performances described in this book as "fancy new things" possibly beyond the comprehension of "average" theatre goers, as Birgit Schreyer Duarte does in her introduction to *The Perfectionist*, is to me parochial and unproductive. This book is poised to situate current Canadian work on the world stage. Rather than reinforcing a local opposition between normative and alternative theatre, it could relate the works it presents to similar theatres from around the world; thus dispelling the notions of novelty and inaccessibility that limit and isolate Canadian artists and audiences rather than relating and opening them up to one another. I am perhaps overstating my case, but there is in the scholarship that frames this book a tone of naïve and inexperienced delight and I feel that future volumes would benefit from more balancing wisdom, history, and breadth of spectatorship.

That said I still find this work to be a great achievement.

Readers will surely find within it both nourishment and inspiration and I recommend it wholeheartedly to scholars and artists alike.

#### WORKS CITED

Delgado, M., and D. Rebellato, eds. *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.

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