

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English sets out to make the best critical and scholarly work in the field readily available to teachers, students, and scholars of Canadian drama and theatre. In volumes organized by playwright, region, genre, theme and cultural community, the series publishes the work of scholars and critics who have, since the so-called renaissance of Canadian theatre in the late 1960s and early 1970s, traced the coming-into-prominence of a vibrant theatrical community in English Canada.

As the last volume in the series was just published, and since none of the volumes had yet been reviewed in our journal, we thought it timely and meet to devote the bulk of our review pages in the next two issues to reviews of this important and useful series. In most cases, reviewers address themselves to two or even three of the volumes in a single review, grouped according to theme, region, or other synergistic rubrics. In some cases, I've also turned to international and non-anglophone scholars with particular expertise in the unifying rubric (e.g., space and theatre) and some familiarity with Canadian theatre but who would not consider themselves Canadianists. This choice reflects first, the fact that most Anglophone Canadian theatre scholars have contributed in some way to the series, increasing the difficulty of finding an appropriate, arms-length reviewer. This turn to our international and francophone theatre colleagues also acts on the desire to invite other perspectives on Canadian theatre scholarship, to send our good work into international networks, and to foster intellectual dialogue across borders.

Bonne lecture !

BURNETT, LINDA, ed.

Theatre in Atlantic Canada

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 16. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2010. 206pp.

LEVIN, LAURA, ed.

Theatre and Performance in Toronto

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 21. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2011. 210pp.

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Ric Knowles, as general editor of *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English*, writes, "Each volume is edited and introduced by

an expert in the field who has selected a representative sampling of the most important critical work on her or his subject since the 1970s, ordered chronologically according to the original dates of publication.” In assembling the essays, each editor generates a narrative of the shifting concerns raised by the commentators about a particular aspect of Canadian theatre. Linda Burnett introduces her selection of essays for *Theatre in Atlantic Canada* by providing an overview of the chronology of theatre in the region, allowing each essay to stand as if discrete. Laura Levin’s editorial approach is different from that of Burnett. Levin, in her introduction to *Theatre and Performance in Toronto*, suggests that she has selected essays which “situate theatre *within* the Toronto context” (viii), in ways that complement and challenge accepted suppositions around the development of theatre in Toronto and, particularly, narratives about the alternative theatre movement of the 1970s.

Burnett is candid in her introduction that creating the collection left her with a number of questions, including why are media outlets, including ones local to Atlantic Canada, reluctant to review theatre produced in the region? Why must so many of the region’s theatre artists spend time in Montreal and Toronto to gain recognition? Why are aboriginal theatre practitioners largely invisible? (xi). Burnett indicates that she shares the view that “money, or the lack thereof, offers one answer” (xi). She suggests that the model of colonialism is still in place, with the historic colonial power of New York and London as the centres of the cultural empire in Canada now replaced by the new centres of colonizing cultural might: Montreal and Toronto.

It would be difficult to dispute that the lack of money shapes the terms of theatrical production in Atlantic Canada—and elsewhere in the country. Theatre is a material form of art which carries cost, even when practitioners strive to marshal scant resources, producing work with creative vitality at minimal fiscal outlay. Theatre has its costs, beyond the budget of a production. Burnett notes, borrowing from Mary Vingoe, that costs include infrastructure to support and sustain cultural production, such as training programs for artists. The under-funding of the cultural sector, particularly in Atlantic Canada, means that this sort of infrastructure is nearly non-existent. Further, under-funding carries associated, non-monetary costs. Virtually all of the essays included in the volume suggest that practitioners of theatre in Atlantic Canada struggle to be recognized, a struggle which can sometimes lead to a perception of failure, as suggested by Brian Parker’s analysis of the work of Michael Cook and Alan Filewod’s account of the Mummers Troupe 1987.

Reading the collection as whole, despair seems to be the emotional filter through which theatre in Atlantic Canada is read. Only occasionally is it countered by the celebration of innovative theatricality such as Donna Smyth's account of the puppetry of Mermaid Theatre and Denyse Lynde's account of Artistic Fraud's development of "kaleidography" which "forces an entire cast to move and flow into images, one after another" (99).

Oddly, the third essay in *Theatre and Performance in Toronto*, "In the Beginning Was Toronto," taken from Renate Usmiani's *Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement in Canada*, affirms the sense practitioners of theatre in Atlantic Canada have that they are colonized, and that if they are to be taken seriously, they need to go to Toronto, or perhaps Montreal. The title of Usmiani's essay is ironic, a reference to the robust sense that practitioners of alternative theatre in Toronto had of the importance of their work to the development of an authentic Canadian theatre. Usmiani recognizes the problematic nature of the claim: "Canadian theatre history offers evidence for the existence of antecedents to the alternative theatre movement, along the lines of both introspective/poetic and committed/political theatre: however, there is as yet no demonstrable influence of these developments, which mostly took place in the 1930s, upon the new wave" (23). By writing a history of the alternative theatres as an assertion of cultural nationalism, Usmiani herself largely abandons the implications of her comment. The founding figures of the alternative theatre movement, all men, become heroic figures of cultural resistance, as if without forebears. As Levin notes in her introduction to *Theatre and Performance in Toronto*, Usmiani's account is an exemplar of a particular type of account of the history of the city's theatre which "usually ends with the 'mainstreaming' of alternative theatres and their eventual coming of age (through owning property)" (ix). Levin adds that the celebration of alternative theatres as the origin of contemporary Canadian theatre "is still taught at many universities today" (ix).

The editorial project of *Theatre and Performance in Toronto* is to assemble essays which challenge this orthodoxy, not to discard and replace this particular version of the history of theatre in Toronto, but to present a set of essays that suggests there are histories rather than a singular history. The unstable status of dominant narrative about alternative theatres which presents them as the origin of contemporary Canadian theatre is evident through Levin's choice of essays. The first two essays, by Sandra Sourchotte Ketchum and by Robert Wallace, address materialist forces which

contributed to the “mainstreaming” of alternative theatres in Toronto: Ketchum, whose essay was published in 1979, identifies the impact of some alternative theatres acquiring buildings; Wallace, whose essay was published in 1980, suggests that the sustained successes of alternative theatres in the 1970s led to their becoming part of a renewed theatre “industry” (8). These two essays were written a bit earlier than Usmiani’s piece (published in 1983), suggesting that the accepted narrative of alternative theatres—and their founders—resisting the forces of cultural imperialism was challenged before the narrative was written. Why did this narrative of heroism gain such currency, particularly given that its acceptance involves pronounced exclusions which are addressed by essayists whose work Levin includes?

Alan Filewod points out that there are many examples of resistant theatre before the 1970s, including the workers’ theatre movement in the 1930s; Amanda Hale draws the attention of readers to the vibrant work of women in the 1970s; Ric Knowles makes a case for the emergence of intercultural theatre as both being an effect of Toronto’s pluralistic population and, reciprocally, shaping the identity of the city. Perhaps tellingly, the undercurrent of anxiety about the relation of theatre in Atlantic Canada to that in Toronto (and Montreal) in *Theatre in Atlantic Canada* speaks to the pernicious force of celebrating alternative theatres as the originary moment of theatre in contemporary Canada, implying that other modes of theatre are inferior and lacking.

Levin’s selection of essays includes a wide range of work, including that of Michael McKinnie who borrows from the paradigms of cultural geography to explore theatre buildings and their locations; and that of Susan Bennett who discusses theatre as a tool of tourism within the global context. The essays in *Theatre and Performance in Toronto*, read as a collection, chart a fundamental problem of history: the past can never be recovered in singular coherent narrative; there are histories each of which tells a story that is marked by investments, evasions, and blindnesses. This argument is implied in *Theatre in Atlantic Canada*. Unlike Levin, Burnett does not have a large archive of criticism upon which she could draw. Critics of English-Canadian theatre, for whatever reason, have been preoccupied with theatre in Toronto. In so doing, there is a significant imbalance in the ecology of the criticism—far too little attention and recognition has been given to the rich range of activity theatrical activity in Atlantic Canada. The focus on theatre in Toronto has done little to counter, and perhaps tacitly reinforces Toronto as the cultural colonizer of Canada.