

ROB APPLEFORD, ed.

Aboriginal Drama and Theatre

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 1.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2005. 187pp.

ALAN FILEWOD, ed.

Theatre Histories

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 13.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2009. 226pp.

SUSAN KNUTSON, ed.

Canadian Shakespeare

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol.
18. Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2010. 214pp.

W.B. WORTHEN

It's a measure of the critical and political orientation of the superb *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* series that the first volume is devoted to *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre*. In its title, of course, the volume lays claim to a specific sense of the field: whatever "Canadian Theatre" will emerge from the series, it will begin by embracing *Aboriginal drama and theatre*—a set of vexed terms in themselves—as constitutive. General editor Ric Knowles animates the "teaching of Canadian drama and theatre in schools and universities" with this initial gesture, and whether it's Lewis Baumander's 1987 and 1989 productions of *The Tempest*, set on the Queen Charlotte Islands in the late eighteenth century and featuring two First Nations actors—Monique Mojica and Billy Merasty—as Ariel and Caliban, or the repeated engagements with the work of Mojica, Tomson Highway, and other writers and performers, the "Canadian theatre" that emerges from this series maps its diversity from this point of departure.

What do these three volumes have in common and how do they sketch the ambition of the series: to bring together the "most important critical work" (*Aboriginal Drama and Theatre* iii)—a mix of previously-published and newly-commissioned pieces—in the field, to open a perspective on the emergence of the formal discipline of Canadian Theatre Studies, and to "fill in gaps in representation" and "correct historical injustices and imbalances, particularly those concerning marginalized communities" (*Canadian Shakespeare* iii). In the *Theatre Histories* volume, Alan Filewod has been guided by a set of thematic concerns operating

across the articles: an urgent commitment to feminist analysis (Susan Bennett's "Feminist (Theatre) Historiography/Canadian (Feminist) Theatre"), to the interplay between local and national identity formations (Ric Knowles's account of Mulgrave Road), and to the interface—marked in Denis Salter's landmark essay "On Native Ground: Canadian Theatre Historiography and the Postmodernism/Post-colonialism Axis"—between historiography and the competing paradigms of postcolonial and post-modern analysis, two terms of the art coeval with the configuration of Canadian Theatre Studies itself. These motifs are traced in other volumes, too, whether it's the localism of the classroom in Tony Dawson's essay on university actors meeting the universal bard in Susan Knutson's *Canadian Shakespeare*, on the ways in which nationalism is both reproduced and interrogated in specific Shakespeare productions and by the institutional function of festivals like Stratford, or indeed, in one of the central essays of *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre*, Knowles's self-conscious engagement of the productive friction between Aboriginal performance and an emerging academic discipline: is there a sense of the "cultural work" that this performance "might perform in shifting power relationships within contemporary Canadian and 'American' (in its broadest senses) societies" (107).

Beyond charting a wary encounter with *Canadian / Theatre / Studies*, each of these volumes evinces a different grasp of the interplay between specific writers, companies, and productions and the development of framing analytical paradigms. *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre* opens, for instance, with Tomson Highway's 1987 "On Native Mythology," an intense and personal effort to locate the task of the playwright in relation to the desire of "we Indian people" to defend its "dreamlife," its "particular landscape," and to share that "something terribly relevant and beautiful" with "general audiences" (3). Sheila Rabillard's pendant essay, "Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid: Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway," elegantly places *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in critical dialogue with the interpretive practices of hybridity, allegory, and postcolonial mimesis. Although Highway bulks large in this volume, *Aboriginal Drama and Theatre* not only gives voice to other writers—Floyd Favel Starr, Daniel David Moses, Yvette Nolan—but also provides shrewd readings of the challenges posed by the interplay of emerging artists and reciprocating modes of critique and analysis, perhaps most pointedly assessed in Knowles's "Translators,

Traitors, Mistresses, and Whores: Monique Mojica and the Mothers of the Métis Nation.”

In the *Theatre Histories* volume, too, individual companies (Mulgrave Road), theatrical institutions (Richard Plant’s essay on the Toronto Lyceum), and productions (James Hoffman’s reading of “British Columbia’s First Play,” *Nootka Sound; Or, Britain Prepar’d*) rub up against essays claiming a wider revisionist purpose. Sometimes that purpose is reflected in the treatment of a movement, as in Alan Filewod’s presentation of the workers’ theatre movement, or Knowles and Mojica’s introduction to their volume *Staging Coyote’s Dream*, or Tony Berto’s treatment of the challenges of “Researching Contemporary Canadian Queer Theatre.” Throughout, a theoretical armature palpably sustains the narrative drive, an interaction superbly performed by the collection’s final piece, “*Sinking Neptune*.” An historical performance by The Radical Dramaturgy Unit of Optative Theatrical Laboratories, *Sinking Neptune* simultaneously enacts and interrogates the controversial re-performance of Marc Lescarbot’s 1606 *Theatre of Neptune in New France*—a *redface* spectacle in which four “savages,” played by French sailors, performed their submission to the rule of France, all for the benefit of a Mi’kmaq audience—as a critique of the plan to use *Theatre Neptune* to celebrate the “400th anniversary of theatre in Canada.” The Radical Dramaturgy Unit’s playscript, inspired by works like *The Laramie Project* and Augusto Boal, “restores” *The Theatre of Neptune* through performance, reportage, and commentary by one “Alan Filewod,” and, not incidentally, enacts a brilliant model of the interplay of research and performance, one that might well be explored by university theatre departments (including my own).

Laudably, the *Canadian Shakespeare* volume has appeared near the end of the run of the series, frankly displacing one of the foundational myths of North American theatre: the English language theatre owes its identity, its integrity, and its value to *doing* Shakespeare. Here, Baumander’s production is given pride of place in Helen Peters’s leadoff article, but the volume also traces the specificity of Canadian acting traditions, both in a short piece by Ann Wilson and Steven Bush, and more extensively in Anthony Dawson’s treatment of the practical difficulties that arise from attempting to dislodge a kind of Shakespearean universalism from actor training. Dawson imagines an approach to acting that foregrounds not the universality of Shakespearean character, but “the cultural situating of the interpreter”; at the same time, Dawson argues, we must “pay attention to the ethical tradition associated

with character and the kind of universalism supported by that tradition” (97). This deft interaction of political and theoretical critique with the naturalized pragmatics of theatrical production sustains several of the essays here, including Knowles’s superb treatment of the representation of the Stratford Festival, and a number of informative readings of individual productions. *Canadian Shakespeare* is also distinguished by its attention to a surprisingly widespread, successful (and “Canadian?”) involvement in Shakespeare adaptation, not only in the plays of Anne-Marie MacDonald or Djanet Sears, but also in the work that performance can do to refigure the function of Shakespeare in contemporary culture: Sorouja Moll’s interview with Yvette Nolan about her production of *Death of a Chief*, an Aboriginal adaptation (with Kennedy Cathy MacKinnon) of *Julius Caesar*; Daniel Fischlin’s critique of “what Canadians have done to Shakespeare, as a global brand constitutive of yet another colonial master narrative worthy of adaptation” (171); and Wes Folkerth’s “Goodfellows: Hockey, Shakespeare and Indigenous Spirits in Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*.”

Volumes in the series don’t aspire to “coverage,” nor do they offer a synoptic essay overviewing the topic by the editor: teachers looking for an assignable essay on the history of “Canadian Shakespeare” or “Aboriginal drama and theatre” should look elsewhere. Instead, the series offers engagements, essays that track important writers, companies, productions, movements, and critical paradigms that have shaped an understanding of Canadian Theatre Studies as it has developed in the past thirty years. Individual readers may (or may not) be disappointed that some of the essays are excerpted; for me, the decision not to index each volume is a more important oversight. Reading these books is to encounter a range of important and often inspiring scholarship; some entirely new essays, and some classics of contemporary theatre studies; a kaleidoscopic set of changing perspectives on the changing project of Canadian Theatre Studies. The series also offers an implicit provocation, destabilizing not only notions of *Aboriginal theatre and drama*, *theatre history*, and *Shakespeare* but the practices of scholarship and critique that define disciplinary frontiers as well. To judge only by these three volumes, the series as a whole provides considerably more than was claimed for it at the outset: it’s certainly a resource, a conversation, a library, but what *Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English* really performs is an instigation, one that could be taken up by anyone involved in contemporary theatre and performance studies.