

at the source of its exclusion. Alan Filewod effectively addresses this issue in an article that might well have been included in this collection; in his 1997 essay, he highlights the paradox that the role of solo performance in the construction of a national identity is virtually ignored.² The word “Canada” moreover, does not appear in the title of Stephenson’s work. Still and all, *Solo Performance* contributes, in this regard, many perceptive and enlightening comments on a crucial theatrical phenomenon of our times.

GINNY RATSOY, ed.

Theatre in British Columbia.

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 6. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2006. xxxvi + 228 pp.

ANNE NOTHOE, ed.

Theatre in Alberta.

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 11. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008. xxiii + 177 pp.

STEPHEN HEATLEY

These two collections of reprinted essays, arranged chronologically according to their year of writing, present an impressive historical overview of the evolution of theatre and performance in these two outlying provinces. They both successfully follow the directive of general editor, Ric Knowles, that the compilations should “recognize the important critical heritage of scholarly work in the field and attempt to fill in its most significant gaps by highlighting important work from and about marginalized communities” (*Theatre in British Columbia*, iv), and so we hear not only about the work of large companies and dominant communities (particularly noteworthy is Dianne Bessai’s exhaustive article about Edmonton’s—or should I say “Canada’s”—Citadel Theatre and how it inadvertently spawned an alternative theatre movement in Edmonton) but also about work that has broadened the theatrical complexion of each of these provinces, like Vancouver Sath (essay by Uma Parameswaran), which focuses on the theatrical representation of the Southeast Asian populations in British Columbia. The essays take us as far back as the turn of the twentieth century and community theatre activity in Lethbridge, right up to the twenty-first-century projects of David Diamond’s Headlines Theatre Company. The essays are

instructive not only for their historical foundations, but also in the way they create room for reflection on artists, movements, and companies lost, and the presaging of things to come. Malcolm Page's point #9, in his provocative essay, "Fourteen Propositions about Theatre in British Columbia" is "The Vancouver Playhouse, the Regional Theatre, Lacks an Identity" (32). That company's demise twenty-two years later seems patently eerie in light of Page's 1990 reflection!

Early in her introduction to *Theatre in British Columbia*, Ginny Ratsoy addresses the idea that the "concepts of region and regionalism are perceived by Wylie, Riegel Overlye and Perkins in the introduction to their book entitled *A Sense of Place: Re-Evaluating Regionalism in Canadian and American Writing* (Eds. Wylie and Riegel) as "constructs rather than natural formations" (vii) and wrestles with the question of whether there is academic legitimacy in examining theatre practice through a provincial (constructed) lens. The obvious (and perhaps most pedantic) question would be what defines anything in the theatre as particularly "Albertan" or "British Columbian." What might ultimately be the significance (if any) of examining the theatre framed by these unnatural constructs? In the 1970s and 80s, the theatre community in Canada spent (some might say "wasted") a lot of energy in the impossible quest to define a "Canadian playwright" (born here? lives here? writing about Canadian subject matter? their play has a Canadian setting?). This struggle was mostly an attempt to argue one's right to federal money that was only available if you could achieve the nationalistic determinants of the grant program. I would contend, however, that the struggle with this impossible task was as important to our journey toward understanding ourselves as a nation, as a people, as a set of communities (both geopolitical and cultural), as coming up with a quick and easy definition to which all could concur. "What makes a Canadian playwright?" is answered, in part, by some, all or none of those ingredients. Such is the case with trying to understand oneself as an Albertan or a British Columbian (and I have been both). Theatre is a local art form, a form that takes into account and is given import by where it is being performed and for what audience. Although this may not truly argue for volumes that look at theatre through a provincial lens (most of the articles address more localized communities—Edmonton, Lethbridge, Vancouver, Armstrong, the black community in Vancouver, the indigenous people of the Thompson River region), there is still a reasonable case to be made for theatre scholars to look at similar-

ities and differences that are connected by some sense of geographical closeness especially when reading the two books together. There is a set of resonances and dissonances that expands our understanding of the diversity of the Western Canadian fabric and how the art form expresses both the sameness and difference within and between the two provinces.

I was particularly delighted to take on this task as I spent twenty-two years as a theatre practitioner in Alberta and, since 1999, have continued my career as an academic in British Columbia. During my years in Alberta, it drove me wild (with jealousy, I imagine) that our national institutions (the CBC and the *Globe and Mail*, for starters) created the impression that the only important location for art and culture in Canada was Toronto and, subsequently, the sense that nothing happened between Toronto and Vancouver (with sometimes a begrudging nod to Winnipeg). Since moving to the coast and feeling a similar sense of isolation, I realize that there is an even more imposing impediment to our ability as a nation to embrace the artistic life of the entire country: that is, the Rocky Mountains. When Ginny Ratsoy states that “the construction of the periphery is omnipresent” in BC (xxi), I understand more clearly the connection *between* Alberta and British Columbia. Alberta is, in population, still relatively small compared to Ontario and the ephemeral work of the theatre is a long way from the country’s centre (i.e. Toronto), both geographically and psychologically. Although more attention is paid in the national media to BC (Vancouver in particular), the mountains are still a huge impediment to the free flow of theatrical fare (and cultural understanding) between BC and any part of Canada (including Alberta)! These two volumes become a welcome addition to the critical literature, creating better understanding and, perhaps, appreciation for our western contributions to the art form by our theatrical cousins in the rest of Canada.

In reading the two books together, I was taken by the theatrical fluidity of the Alberta/BC border. The importance of Albertan playwright Elsie Park Gowan’s *The Last Caveman* to Sydney Risk’s Vancouver-based Everyman Theatre Company in the 1940s, Risk’s involvement in theatre in both provinces, the easy travel across the borders by artists like Sharon Pollock, George Ryga, Margo Kane, and Morris Panych, suggest a natural resonance between these two political entities. Playwrights are transient and it is therefore questionable what creates their “provincial pedigree” (and thus placement in one or other of these collections—Pollock, for instance, appears prominently in both). Morris

Panych was born in Alberta, highlights of his career took place in BC, and he currently lives in Toronto. Brad Fraser and Ronnie Burkett are still claimed as Albertans even though neither has lived there for years. Raymond Storey, Greg Nelson, Frank Moher, Joan McLeod, Margaret Hollingsworth (all playwrights whose work is addressed in these volumes) have lived in several places but at some point practiced their art in Alberta or BC. Both Alberta and BC seem like stopping off points for many theatre artists, which may be another of the provinces' similarities.

It is also interesting to note how particular theatrical performance styles have evolved in the two provinces. Does one champion of a form breed others? Alberta claims the reigning monarch of puppetry in Canada, Ronnie Burkett, as one of its own, as well as the more recent and wildly creative Old Trout Puppet Workshop. In BC there is an explosion of physical/image based companies, represented in this collection by Reid Gilbert and his exploration of the work of Wendy Gorling and Morris Panych which culminated in the national non-verbal hit, *The Overcoat*.

And to finish, the thing that moves me about these volumes is Knowles's commitment that these volumes will "honour the work of some of the scholar/pioneers of a field that is still, excitingly, young" (*Alberta*, iv) Our theatre is still young and it is a delight and a privilege to revisit the thinking of scholars who have ploughed the fields of theatrical criticism before it even was a field and enlightened us even as we were only beginning to understand what we might have wrought in our theatres in these two provinces on the edge of Canada.

BRUCE BARTON, ed.

Collective Creation, Collaboration and Devising.

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 12.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2008. xliii + 269pp.

RIC KNOWLES and INGRID MÜNDEL, eds.

"Ethnic," Multicultural, and Intercultural Theatre.

Critical Perspectives on Canadian Theatre in English. Vol. 14.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2009. xxvi + 206pp.

RACHAEL VAN FOSSEN

The range and diversity of artists, works, performance practices, and critical analyses in these two volumes hold in common