

correcting this absence again often packages what is Asian Canadian as a coherent and unified entity. To their credit, the editors acknowledge this limitation. For instance, Aquino and Knowles note how the expectation of pan-ethnic unity only highlights the exclusion in their anthology of concerted attention to work on or by South Asian Canadians. Aquino informs readers not to think of the works included in *Love + Relationships* as a set of “greatest hits.” Nonetheless, there are immense pressures here to be both fully representative and definitive in ways that might unintentionally limit the broader public understanding of Asian Canadian theatre.

Perhaps the contribution of these volumes should not be measured, then, so much in the fullness of its coverage, but rather in its presentation of singular, yet significant, moments of connection. In this we might note, as Christine Kim does, the importance of reflecting on the more intimate theatrical encounter. Kim looks at a particular instance of the 2007 Theatre Replacement’s series of six seven-minute monologues, *Bioboxes*. These performances were staged for single audience members, with the actor wearing a small box on her shoulders; audience members could control whether the performer speaks in English or a second language (French, Chinese, German, Italian, Japanese, and Serbo-Croatian). Through examining the “Japanese box” (written and performed by Vancouver-based artist Cindy Mochizuki), Kim turns attention to whether these intimate moments of one-on-one exchange can “generate interest in the mundane intimacies of racialized lives” (189) in order to test the more comfortable limits of multicultural political recognition. Within these three new collections, Kim provides one of many valuable reminders that Asian Canadian theatre can get to the heart of racial, ethnic, and cultural difference, not just in its diverse and momentous public dimensions, but also in the quiet and minute realm of the everyday.

DWAYNE BRENNAN

Our Kind of Work: The Glory Days and Difficult Times of 25th Street Theatre.

Saskatoon: Thistledown Press, 2011. 237 pp.

MOIRA J. DAY

In 1979, national arts reviewer Jamie Portman lauded 25th Street Theatre, and “its irrepressible artistic director,” Andy Tahn, for rising above a perpetual lack of money and facilities to realize a

rich, sustaining vision of a populist theatre that “reaches out to the ordinary people, tugging at their hearts and stirring their minds” and relates “uniquely to the psychology of the particular community which it serves.”³

Flush from its success with *Paper Wheat*, notes Dwayne Brenna, 25th Street Theatre often seemed equally willing to merge its image with that of Tahn “as the little guy with his heart in the right place who could achieve great things against the odds” (120). It was a form of self-mythologization, Brenna suggests, that could be as dangerously reckless as exhilaratingly productive in its results, leaving the 25th Street juggernaut to sputter and veer as often as it roared ahead to lead the pack. Identifying “the glory days” of the theatre with the decade between the founding of the theatre in 1972, and Tahn’s final departure in 1983, Brenna delivers a short, generally engaging book dealing with the tension between the “glory” of the theatre’s passionate idealism, especially as expressed in its early collective creation work, and the increasingly “difficult times” imposed on it by the harsh realities of diminishing funding, chronically inadequate theatre space, understaffing, and hit-and-miss programming, as frequently exacerbated by burnout, naivety, poor judgment and inadequate planning. Reminding the reader of the great things that the theatre actually did achieve against the odds, Brenna makes it clear that he is not using the term “glory days” ironically. Nonetheless, he also methodically documents the increasing financial, administrative and physical difficulties that eventually exhausted even Tahn’s irrepressible resourcefulness; the theatre survived, and eventually even thrived again, but it entered a new era with Tahn’s departure.

Brenna’s book marks a significant addition to the growing canon of work on the alternative theatres that sprang up over the 1970s and that revolutionized indigenous acting, writing, directing, and design both in their own regions and in the Canadian professional theatre in general. While the study is valuable in clarifying the symbiotic relationship between the Saskatchewan company and such peers as Theatre Network, Theatre Passe Muraille, and the Mimmers’ Troupe, it is invaluable, especially in a field dominated by books on Central and Eastern Canadian companies, in grounding the work of this prairie company within its own distinctive regional place and time.

The book is often at its best in exploring the complex ways in which the theatre engaged (and sometimes utterly failed to engage) with “the psychology of the particular community”

(Portman) it was serving. Even in dealing with such nationally well-known plays as *Paper Wheat*, *Jessica* (Campbell, Griffiths), and *Cold Comfort* (Gerrard), Brenna explains how local responses to the work differed from national responses, and where early versions of the same piece sometimes significantly differed from what travelled out of province. Brenna also highlights the remarkable eclecticism with which the theatre interpreted its populist mandate. In addition to premiering Brad Fraser's sexually-charged first play, *Wolfboy* (1978), it produced a collective creation exploring the diversity of religion and its related ethnicities across the province, and at least two other plays besides *Jessica*—one, earnest and ambitious if flawed, the other, horrendously bad—that attempted to engage with aboriginal themes, issues, and communities within the province. The theatre seemed less successful at engaging with the “psychology” of the critical and funding bodies it relied on to support its populist mandate. Even those eager to support 25th Street Theatre's brand of experimental, home-grown theatre, could become impatient with the rough, unfinished quality of the work that arrived hot on the boards, especially when it arrived late—anywhere from days to years late—and in lesser quantities or in a different format than advertised. On Tahn's side, the unwillingness of conservative bureaucrats to “waste” money on an adequate theatre centre even after 25th had given years of service to the community was one of the factors that hastened his final departure.

Despite its virtues, the book does have its limitations. Scholars will look in vain for a bibliography (endnotes only are given) and index. There are also curious omissions in its reportage and analysis. In the absence of virtually any mention of Regina's Globe Theatre (1966), the unwary might come away assuming that 25th Street Theatre (1972) was Saskatchewan's first professional theatre, or at least the first to actively promote Saskatchewan playwrights. Unlike most regional theatres, the Globe was unusually attentive to local writers in its early years, and it would have been worth discussing it briefly, even as a point of comparison. It also seems odd to mention Gordon McCall as the short-lived artistic director of 25th Street following Tahn, without citing his later, more influential role as the founding artistic director of Shakespeare-on-the-Saskatchewan. Finally, while one appreciates the logic of ending an analysis of the early years of the theatre with Tahn's 1983 departure, one questions the decision to relegate the whole 1983-1999 period to a relatively brief epilogue. The Bentley-Fisher years (1985-1997), which oversaw

some of the theatre's most productive work, including the founding of the Saskatoon Fringe, surely deserve more than a few paragraphs of commentary. Similarly, the theatre's contentious decision to leave active production in 1999 to simply manage the Fringe, surely merits more than a single sentence mentioning the plays 25th planned to produce as part of its last season—a season that was never actually completed.

In the end, while one values *Our Kind of Work* for what it tells of the history of one of Saskatchewan's most important theatres, one has to agree with Brenna that "there is still much left to write about 25th Street Theatre" (210). One hopes to eventually see a companion volume completing the story.

Notes

- 1 Andrea Davis's chapter includes an analysis of *yagayah*, a play that I co-wrote with d'bi.young.
- 2 Alan Filewod, "Actors Acting Not-Acting," in Marta Dvorak, ed., *La création biographique* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1997), 51-58.
- 3 Jamie Portman, "Grassroots in Saskatchewan," *Edmonton Journal* 7 March 1979: E2.