BOOK REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS

JULIE SALVERSON, ed.
Popular Political Theatre and Performance.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2010. xii + 215 pp.

JULIE SALVERSON, ed.
Community Engaged Theatre and Performance.
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2011. xiv + 192 pp.

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Community Engaged Theatre and Performance and *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* have much in common: most obviously an editor, a commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship and approaches to theatre, and an appreciation of theatre's ability to engender social change. Editor Julie Salverson notes the many similarities between the two volumes in her introductions to both texts and explicitly states her intention for the volumes to be read alongside one another. However, she is also clear to distinguish the two books from one another by differentiating the particular aims of the theatre projects they analyze. Salverson outlines that *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* "explicitly addresses companies and people where the politics and desire to provoke social change is front and centre," whereas *Community Engaged Theatre and Performance* "concerns projects where the primary goal is to engage community voices" (*Community* vii). Yet the two volumes make clear that divisions between popular political theatre and community theatre have broken down to a considerable extent, as evidenced by references to the "community" theatre projects in *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* as well as descriptions of the "political" goals and motivations of performances in *Community Engaged Theatre and Performance.* Perhaps then the categories of "popular political theatre" and "community theatre" distinguish themselves not so much through their form or final product, but rather through their starting points and initial intentions: political theatre by rooting its practice in the identification of particular problems and its subsequent pursuit of various goals, outcomes, or critiques; and community theatre by initiating performance practice in a place of similarity, solidarity, and/or belonging.

It is interesting to note how generously "theatre" is interpreted in these two volumes, as exemplified by their coverage of a wide variety of activities, including mending underwear at an arts drop-in centre (Ruth Howard's "The Cultural Equivalent of Daycare Workers?"), storytelling in law (Sherene Razack's "The Gaze from the Other Side: Storytelling for Social Change"), and crafting newspaper collage placemats (Ruth Howard's "Placemats for September 11"). Many of the projects featured not just in *Community Engaged Theatre and Performance* but also in *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* examine forms of theatre created by, about, and for particular social, political, and cultural communities. In line with this, the projects described often implicitly value the process of creation over the final product, and accordingly the essays concentrate the bulk of their analyses on the ways in which these projects develop, rather than on their culminating performances. In describing his experiences of collectively creating The Mummers Troupe's *Gros Mourn*, Chris Brookes exemplifies both volumes' emphases on processes of collaboration, artistic responsibility, and political activism. Rather than providing detailed thematic analysis of the production, Brookes chronicles its development through initial ideation, data collection, research interpretation, and post-production reflections on its community impact. Brookes poignantly speaks to the responsibilities involved for theatre artists working in and with communities not their own, writing "we learned to respect the dangers of parachuting into a community by ourselves" (*Popular* 11).

Issues of funding and economics permeate many of the pieces in the two volumes. There is a profound sense that popular and community forms of theatre are undervalued and underfunded, a sentiment that rings particularly true within the current climate of public funding cuts to the arts and social services in Canada. The projects analyzed often rely on precarious resources, including conditional government funding, partnerships with private donors, and volunteer labour. The resulting productions frequently feature low ticket prices or no ticket prices to reduce barriers in accessibility for audience members. Economies of volunteerism and philanthropy pervade many of the projects described in the two volumes, demonstrating some of the unique working conditions experienced with these artistic practices.

The outcomes of the shows covered in the two books—namely, social change—are exceptionally complicated and difficult to measure or track. This, of course, makes them no less

important to consider, as Edward Little and Rachael Van Fossen express in their reflections on community theatre in *CETP*: "[a]s with most projects of this type, the question of what happens after the culminating performance has taken place is important to consider" (108). These types of questions make Patrick Keating's appendixed personal reflection in Richard Payne's "Theatre Inside-Out: An Educational Monograph: Alternative Theatre in Prisons" all the more exciting. Keating testifies firsthand to the value and continuing benefits that can result from community theatre projects: thirty years ago he was a participant in Keating's theatre initiative with incarcerated men in a Canadian federal prison; now, he works in theatre. Keating's letter serves as a reminder of the real, material consequences that can and do arise from these projects, and by extension, the stakes involved with this type of artistic practice.

The essays in *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* are remarkably enriching and insightful for their ability to grapple with some of the complex, uncomfortable, and challenging issues innate to popular theatre. In "Underdeveloped Alliance," Ian Filewod explores NGOs and social justice activists' interest in using theatre for development work, arguing that "[i]nsufficient understanding of what popular theatre is leads to disappointment" (37). Filewod's honesty about popular theatre's limitations and potential for failure when improperly employed offers refreshing perspective and helpful warning about the realities of its practice. Many of the pieces in the volume detail groups' particular experiences in creating theatre events, but some essays engage more directly with wider questions in the field, such as Catherine Graham's "On the Political Importance of the Aesthetic." In her proposal that activist performance carries a political responsibility to cultivate and rigorously utilize an aesthetic mode of critique, Graham challenges activist theatre creators to consciously and carefully employ aesthetic strategies. I would suggest that Graham's proposal that "our political role as artists and critics of activist theatre is above all to master our art form and so to open up new possibilities and create new worlds" is one method to avoid creating the kind of disappointing popular theatre discussed by Filewod (151).

Community Engaged Theatre and Performance pays especially close attention to the circumstances and nuances surrounding the ways in which theatre facilitates the meeting and collaboration of particularly positioned groups and people. Community is largely treated as a compass determining the direc-

tion of the performances in this volume, although as Honor Ford-Smith points out, static and naïve concepts of community must be challenged. In "Whose Community? Whose Art? The Politics of Reformulating Community Arts," Ford-Smith critically interrogates notions of "community" within community art, as she writes:"[b]ut the idea that 'community' is somehow a pure space, which is more inherently democratic and utopian and which exists in a space uncontaminated by the ideologies of the marketplace, does not necessarily follow" (94). Biography and autobiography are central to the community projects in this volume and their complex explorations of community. Nisha Sajani notes some of the challenges and strategies inherent to employing biographical performance for community theatre, writing, "[i]t is memory work, not for nostalgia's sake, but rather as a strategy for change and for a more meaningful communication between individuals and communities" (120). These community projects feature stories of difficult negotiations and compromises between diverse stakeholders to highlight some of the existing divides both in and between communities that both motivate and aggravate this type of work.

Community Engaged Theatre and Performance and *Popular Political Theatre and Performance* offer many interesting case studies of theatre projects oriented towards social justice that would be inspirational and informative to a broad range of theatre practioners and critics. The essays in the two volumes are inherently interdisciplinary in nature: many of the projects discussed were created by and for a wide variety of groups who do not come from traditional theatre backgrounds. Savannah Walling's chapter highlights the extra considerations and responsibilities that may arise in working with people not formally trained in theatre. Detailing her experience producing a play with community members of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Walling describes facing "language, literacy, economic and cultural barriers, and issues of food, poverty, legal and illegal drugs, safety, and security" (*CETP* 133). Walling further attests to the participant's increased degree of risk in simultaneously being both a community member and artist, writing: "[w]e couldn't leave after the play finished. We would have to live with the consequences: if our work fell short, the whole community would pay–not just us" (*CETP* 131). Certainly there is an awareness throughout both volumes that the particularly high personal stakes involved with political and community forms of theatre increase both the work's potential for challenge,

conflict, and disappointment, as well as possibilities for lasting and widespread positive changes.

Situated within this rich interdisciplinary terrain, the projects featured in both volumes challenge traditional assumptions about theatrical agents, customs, and processes. The projects often blur the boundaries between theatre and other fields, including development work, social work, law, sociology, and psychology. As such, the essays would be of value to a wide variety of scholars in the social sciences and humanities. Readers of the two volumes will benefit from their coverage of a multiplicity of ways in which theatre engages and is engaged by scholars and practitioners from diverse backgrounds in innovative, creative, and meaningful ways.

ERIN HURLEY
National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion.
Toronto: U Toronto P, 2011. 244 pp. Illus., index.

ALAN FILEWOD

With the election of a Parti Québécois minority government in 2012 and the promise of a referendum under the shadow of political violence, Quebec sovereignty is again on the national agenda. In the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Premier-elect Pauline Marois on the night of the PQ victory, Céline Dion headlined a benefit concert in aid of the family of Denis Blanchette, the technician working the event who was killed by a politically motivated gunman. At that concert, Dion was the ostensibly Québécoise face who legitimized the presence of anglophone musical stars (Arcade Fire, Ben Harper, Patrick Watson, Martha Wainwright, and Anna McGarrigle) who shared the stage with Québécois artists (Coeur de pirate, Dumas, Eric Lapointe, Vincent Vallières) to isolate the shooter as a lone madman and to deflect the fear of a reactionary anglo terrorism.

I refer to Dion as the "ostensibly" Québécoise face because, as Erin Hurley shows in this supple and provocative examination of the procedural rhetorics of Quebec's national performance of *québécité*, Céline Dion (and her Americanized self, Celine Dion) troubles conventional readings of nation, performance, and representation. Her "inescapabilty" can only be understood by examining affect instead of signification; when we look at Dion's