

BOOK REVIEWS/ COMPTES RENDUS

Risking the Void: The Scenography of Cameron Porteous

Catalogue of an Exhibition curated and designed by Sean Breough and Patricia Flood, Theatre Museum of Canada and the University of Guelph, 2009. 92 pp.

KATHLEEN IRWIN

In the expert hands of Sean Breough and Patricia Flood, *Risking the Void* is a celebration of the artistry of Cameron Porteous, one of English Canada's iconic set and costume designers. Using productions, presented chronologically across Porteous's significant and expansive career on stage (shown here in work from 1977–2005), it is also a look at the development of scenography in this country across the breadth of its very brief theatre history. It is, furthermore, an exploration of how we represent who we are to ourselves within the proscenium arch; how the look of our stages has changed in response to global trends; and how the training of young designers will inevitably be diminished by the eventual loss of such impassioned artists and mentors—the like of whom we may not see again. Kelly Wolf, who gained valuable training under Porteous's guidance, writes, "I value the rich experience I had as Cameron's assistant and wonder how young designers obtain this experience in this present day" (21). Indeed, Porteous in particular, and a handful of others, including contributors Flood, Breough, Wolf, and Martha Mann, have helped to define stage representation in English Canada in the latter part of the last century and into the twenty-first. As Flood writes, this catalogue is "a celebration not only of the work of a major Canadian Scenographer, but a celebration of his place in the history of Canadian theatrical design" (41). Mann opines, "[t]he bare facts of Cameron's career speak about the development of professional theatre in this country" (11).

Porteous, as a Saskatchewan-born, UK-schooled theatre designer, was an anomaly in early Canadian theatre. Through his training at the Wimbledon College of Art in 1960s London under Richard Negri, he became acquainted with a long line of theatre innovators and iconoclasts—Jacques Copeau, Michel St. Denis, and Tanya Moiseiwitsch, among others—who were instrumental in developing Canadian theatre, either directly or indirectly, through their influence on the Stratford Festival and the National Theatre School. In London, Porteous's eyes were opened to the

work of seminal Czech scenographer, Josef Svoboda and Romanian director, Liviu Ciulei, among other great European theatre artists. Both were to have an enormous impact on his creative vision. In returning to Canada in the 1970s, he brought this effervescence and innovation with him, which became evident in his subsequent work at the Vancouver Playhouse and later at the Shaw Festival.

Due to the scope of his training and experience, Porteous describes himself first and foremost as an artist who works in the theatre. In many ways, Mann writes, “[h]is designs exhibit all the maxims of architectural modernism: less is more, form follows function, and God is in the details” (12). According to Flood, his work is significant in that it represents a transition away from assumptions of theatrical design rooted in realism towards a more modern perspective. In Canada, this vision represented not only an attitudinal shift towards an acceptance of Canadians designing in our own theatres, but also a creative shift that viewed visual interpretation as an essential and vital element in a collaborative partnership between director and designer in the creation of a theatrical performance (42). Along with a group of enthusiastic and talented collaborators, he was an artist who continually pushed the boundaries in exploring innovative approaches to the visualization of a script in production. Mann writes, “[i]f there is such a thing as Canadian scenography, its roots are with Porteous and his long time collaborator and director, Christopher Newton” (66).

Risking the Void, while bringing the important life work of Porteous to public attention, also reveals the processes involved in putting exciting theatre on stage through its many wonderful set and costume renderings and the production stills of photographer David Cooper. At the same time, it speaks to the importance of the archive, specifically the Theatre Museum of Canada, in preserving such ephemeral work.

Of course, this paean to Porteous tells only a portion of the history of scenic design in Canada. This fact was recognized in the conjoined tribute in the Canadian Exhibit at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space / 2011 to Porteous and his French Canadian contemporary and counterpart, François Barbeau who, for decades, has defined (and continues to define) scenographic representation in Quebec and elsewhere. The exhibit, *Risking the Void*, and the accompanying catalogue (here reviewed) were antecedent to that large and more inclusive exhibit. I sincerely hope that this catalogue is likewise a precursor

to a publication that would cover the impressive variety and cultural scope of scenography in Canada—a book that is long overdue.

GILBERT DAVID, ed.

Écrits sur le théâtre canadien-français. Études suivies d'une anthologie (1900-1950). Montréal : Paragraphes, 2011. 518 pp.

RACHEL KILLICK

Fruit of a long-term research project undertaken by Gilbert David and a team of research assistants and collaborators, this substantial volume offers fascinating insight into a vast primary corpus, systematically extracted from contemporary newspapers, periodicals, magazines, and other writings, and available online as a bibliography of nearly seven thousand items, through the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la littérature et la culture québécoises (CRILCQ) at the University of Montreal. Helpfully juxtaposing original texts and analytical comment, it imaginatively provides an introductory overview of the project by David, a three-hundred page anthology of some one hundred items, and studies by the other team members of contemporary publishing environments.

The anthology is organised chronologically into five parts, decade by decade, the number and length of texts varying quite considerably between sections. The 1920s and 1930s feature respectively only eight texts by six authors and twelve texts by eight authors, numbers reflecting, according to David, the low state of contemporary Montreal theatre. In contrast, the 1940s section, with thirty-one texts, some much lengthier than those of earlier periods, clearly demonstrates a new spirit of theatrical endeavour and the elaboration of a more consistently sophisticated reflection on the nature, aspirations, and techniques of theatre, not only by theatre journalists but also by engaged practitioners. Selection has, of course, brought definition to a diffuse and amorphous corpus, but David, as editor, still contrives to suggest the complexity of divergent agendas as first experienced by the research team, thus enabling the reader to share the satisfying sense of discovery as key themes and arguments gradually emerge. These include the Catholic Church's hostility to theatre, viewed as a dangerous competitor for the public voice; the rejection of sensationalist melodrama and the promotion of serious