

Theatre and Immigration: From the Multiculturalism Act to the Sites of Imagined Communities¹

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In English Canada the 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act instigated the study of ethnic, multicultural, and intercultural theatre practices.² In Quebec the 1977 Bill 101 or The Charter of the French Language, which established the fundamental language rights of the people of Quebec and so presented “the most prominent cite of struggle over Quebecois culture and nationhood,” framed similar scholarly and artistic questions (Knowles and Mündel XVI). Today, however, with the growing number of immigrants landing in English Canada and Quebec, urban theatre audiences have become “increasingly diverse” and immigrant artists’ performances “no longer need to appeal either to the traditional white middle-class audience of Canada’s so-called ‘main stages’ [. . .] nor to communities narrowly defined by culture or interest” (XVII). This special issue takes this statement further and focuses on the cultural, personal, and artistic output of immigrant theatre artists who have been working in Canadian theatre for several decades. It argues that representation of an immigrant/immigration on stage constitutes a self-referential move in Canadian theatre. The increased presence of immigrant theatre artists actively contributing to English Canadian and Quebec theatre today invites audiences to rethink such fundamental concepts as nationalism and multiculturalism. Moreover, as this issue demonstrates, immigrant artists’ theatrical aesthetics and concerns situate questions of immigration within the wider discourse and practices of theatre as it relates to globalization and mobile identities worldwide. Hence, the articles chosen for this issue aim to measure the artistic output of Canadian immigrant theatre using the theoretical lenses of postcolonial and intercultural performance theories, studies in linguistics and cultural semiotics, psychoanalysis, and cultural geography. They continue the discussion of intercultural theatre practices in Canada and Quebec, initiated by *Theatre Research in Canada* and *Jeu*;³ and reflect the ongoing debates on theatre and immigration in Canada that took place at the 2013 and 2014 annual meetings of Canadian Association for Theatre Research; and as proposed in my own work on theatre and exile (2012).

Terminology wise, this issue moves away from the metaphorical and somewhat poetized term “exilic artist,” someone found in and/or seeking position of existential estrangement or being an outsider, augmented by the social, political, economic, and physical conditions of the flight (Meerzon 4-8).⁴ It employs a more pragmatic concept: we use the term “immigrant artist,” adapted after the Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s (CIC) definition of political refugees, skilled workers, investors, entrepreneurs, and self-employed people as immigrants, eligible to seek employment in Canada. Such an “immigrant” must have Canadian or foreign educational credentials, demonstrate a sufficient knowledge of English or French, and have at least one year of continuous full-time paid work experience

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in one's primary occupation ("Skilled Immigrants"). The term "immigrant theatre artist" refers to a newcomer to Canada who holds a post-secondary diploma in theatre, has work experience in the trade, and aims to earn a living in Canada or Quebec by working in theatre in English and/or in French.



When the Canadian Liberal government revised its immigration policies and made obtaining refugee status more accessible in the mid-1990s, Canada became one of the most desirable countries for migration. This move created what Bricker and Ibbitson call "The Big Shift" (2), the most significant change in Canada's population in the late twentieth century:

Our population is up 5.9 percent from what it was five years ago [roughly 2010]. About a third of this increase is due to natural population growth (more people being born than dying). The other two-thirds—67 percent, to be precise—is due to immigration [. . .] Because Canada is one of the world's most urban countries [. . .] most immigrants migrate to cities [. . .] Toronto is 46 percent foreign born; Vancouver 30 percent; Winnipeg a respectable 18 percent; but Halifax only 7 percent. (21-22)

Given these statistics and the Harper government's latest attempts to assume a more active role in shaping Canada's workforce demographics through its new immigration policies⁵—including attracting skilled tradespeople and professionals, preferably educated in Canada on study permits ("Harper Government"), which is seen by some as social engineering (Dobbin)—it is time to seriously examine the role immigrants play in reshaping the country's self-image.

An immigrant artist might not possess what the Harper government would consider a highly sought skill that renders her immediately useful to the country's economy. Nevertheless, such an artist is a richly symbiotic, cosmopolitan subject capable of challenging the administrative and financial governing structures of the country from within. She is someone who might ask questions of collective ethics and morals, and hold the mirror of commitments and promises up to the nation and its government, revealing its ideological approach to immigration "rather than any evidence-based solutions" (Niren, qtd. in Radia). Moreover, the government's approach to immigration might also expose Canada to many mistakes recently made by other Western nations. "[C]ontrary to the trend of globalization," writes journalist Andy Radia, such countries as the UK, France, Denmark, Italy, and Germany have taken "a more isolationist stance when it comes to immigration and citizenship." For Radia, "[t]his is the opposite approach of what Canada needs," given the country's deep traditions of nation building based on the physical, emotional, and social input of immigrants. Hence, thinking of these new and rather dangerous tendencies in the Harper government's immigration policies, this special issue asks: if Canada needs to reimagine itself as a nation continuously reshaped by new immigrants, how do these immigrants and specifically immigrant theatre artists participate in this process? To what extent are/will their voices be heard by diverse audiences and by the individuals and the institutions and the power? And what particular artistic and ideological program do immigrant theatre artists propose in the country's collective re-thinking of its politics of multiculturalism and nationalism?

The articles chosen for this issue demonstrate that the artistic output of immigrant artists often helps Canada's culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse audiences negotiate their similarities and differences. The contributions describe the complex processes of negotiation that characterize the mechanisms of communication between immigrant subjects and their hosts, both in their everyday and artistic activities. Each article addresses fundamental issues related to immigration and creating immigrant art. These include re-thinking/re-constructing self in the instances of a) language loss/acquisition/work with an accent (Diana Manole); b) relationships with history (Eury Chang); c) issues of hospitality (Sheila Rabillard); d) time and memory (Manuel Garcia Martínez); e) personal mapping and space (Andrew Houston); and f) divided consciousness (Yana Meerzon). Cynthia Ashperger and Lina de Guevara speak about immigration from their personal experience. With their contributions in the Forum section, these immigrant-actresses draw our attention to the experience of female immigrant subjects, exposed to the judgemental gazes not only in their everyday struggles but also on stage as professional performers.



This issue's second objective is to demonstrate that the artistic and ideological output of immigrant theatre can reveal the mechanisms of constructing Canadian nationalism.⁶ Following Alan Filewod's argument that English Canadian theatre is produced in the motion of creating "imagined community" through art (I-II), the articles contend that immigrant theatre can be also seen stemming from such motion. Filewod applies Benedict Anderson's view of a nation as an "imagined community" to Anglophone Canada and argues that in this context, "the phrase 'Canadian theatre' has always meant an imagined theatre contained within (and often inhibited by) the material theatre of the day. It is a phrase that has expressed longing for a sense of national community and which has been the site of severe contestation" (10). Thus Filewod proposes the narrative of Canadian national theatre as a historical project seeking its own authenticity, when "theatre and nation collapse into each other at the point of imagined authenticity: 'the real' nation is out there, the 'real' theatre is its articulation" (10). Such a conceptual framework not only provides a productive structure to think about the diverse historical contexts of Canadian theatre, but also offers an important groundwork for contextualizing further research on the role of immigrant artists in making theatre and building new imagined communities in Canada today.

Erin Hurley, in her own turn, follows Baudrillard's views on postmodernism as the culture of simulation and mimicry, putting forward a definition of the émigré culture of Quebec (in similar terms to Filewod) as the culture of simulation, imitating in its artistic output the social, linguistic, and artistic structures of the host nation (90-93). She analyzes the dramatic corpus of Marco Micone, a Quebecois playwright of Italian origin, as an example of this process, arguing that he "approaches the issue of ethnic difference from this immigrant space of exiguity and in the mode of simulation" (90). In this gesture, Hurley specifies, Micone's theatre (and any other immigrant project by extension) "writes back to the centre of the Quebec literary institution [. . .] in a process that not only de-centres the centre but uproots it" (90). In this tendency, it "evinces a feminist politic that undoes the masculinist national fantasy of self-originating" (90).

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This issue takes both arguments further: the articles by Manole, Ashperger, and Guevara demonstrate that for many years, through their plays and productions, acting and directing, immigrant theatre artists (consciously or not; acknowledged by critics, financing and cultural agencies or not) have been actively creating the so-called imagined communities of Canadian and Quebecois national theatres. Often, by commenting upon the traumatic events that shaped their personal immigrant experience, these artists create fictional “else-where” and “back-home” environments on stage. Presented to diverse Canadian audiences, these self-reflexive, accented, ironic, meta-theatrical, and estranged environments have become the temporary instances of shared imagined (immigrant) communities; they reflect immigrants’ struggles in second language acquisition, and recognize, challenge, and negotiate the artistic, ideological, and performative tendencies that make Canadian/Quebecois theatre Canadian/Quebecois.⁷ For many immigrant artists, making a theatrical performance itself becomes a process of creating these imagined communities, a new homeland, which “transcends cultural specificity and encourages the development of an identity that is formed from living in the theatre rather than a society” (Turner 23).

The first step in developing a theatrical imagined community is to create new dramaturgies that stage the nation’s image of itself (Filewod 7-8). The same applies to making immigrant theatre: it begins with the establishment of a dramatic canon. For instance, the plays of Marco Micone can offer a good example of the aesthetics and thematic repertoire of the immigrant theatre. These plays focus on such issues as language loss and acquisition, inter-generational conflict, nostalgia, displacement, economic struggle, and the immigrant’s desire to recreate an image of a homeland in the new land; the topics often found in the literature and dramaturgy of immigration. Most importantly, as Martínez shows in his contribution to this issue, Micone’s plays tackle the problem of time: an existential category of human experience, turned in immigration into the cultural characteristic and artistic device to measure psychological and cultural estrangement the immigrants live through in a new land.

The second step in constructing a national theatre is to produce works that reflect historical changes in building the nation. In the case of immigration, this involves developing theatre projects that reflect historical changes in the practices of migration and in its artistic rendering, as shown by Eury Chang and Sheila Rabillard. This is especially relevant to the work of second-generation immigrants interested in exploring how the identity of an immigrant subject can be constructed theatrically. For artists who came to Canada as children or were born to immigrant families, including Marty Chan, David Yee, Betty Quan, Johnny Trinh, David Lam, Nancy Tam, and Mani Soleymanlou (to name a few), questions of belonging, personal and linguistic identity, issues of class and representation, and father/son conflicts become secondary. Rather, these artists focus on questions of a divided self, investigate the devices of representation, and explore the meta-theatrical and meta-historical qualities of theatrical performance. At the same time, as Houston and I argue in this issue, in their therapeutic function these works lead to the self-reflexivity of the form, in which the processes of narration and performance are made visible.

This artistic shift reflects how the conditions of immigration and its practices in Canada have radically changed from the 1970s. It also suggests that the culture of immigration relies on investigating and staging one’s subjectivity, the characteristic that approximates immigrant theatre to transnational and cosmopolitan theatre aesthetics. This issue illustrates this

point as well: it discusses the work of immigrant artists who carry within themselves multi-layered, multivocal, and constantly shifting performative contexts. The articles present immigration as a lonely but unique process, conditioned by the circumstances of departure and arrival; one's professional skills and aspirations; and the artist's willingness to compromise and adapt to new professional requirements and limitations. They reveal that the problems of "looks and sound," contending with an accent in one's speech or writing, or coping with the absence of funding or professional networking are common to the immigrant experience. In these aspects, the work and the destiny of an immigrant artist resembles that of the exilic one. Immigrant theatre, based on the principles of amalgamation and continuity, adapts to the new social, economic, and cultural structures of its projected audiences. Immigrants tend to assume a new artistic identity, while remaining true to the artistic aspirations they brought from home. Their theatre is not binary; it presents cultural and cognitive synaesthesia and originates as a fusion of the artists' inherited cultural traditions and those of a new world, so it repeatedly stages the tension between continuity and difference.

In this context, the production *Polyglotte*, which premiered at the 2015 Festival TransAmériques (Montreal), must be cited. Created by Olivier Choinière, one of Quebec's leading non-immigrant theatre artists, and his co-creator Alexia Bürger, *Polyglotte* features a group of recent immigrants, non-actors, invited by the artists to share their radically different (to non-immigrants) view of Canada. Collectively, the participants were invited to provide a "contemporary look at the country as it is"; "to overturn the way we imagine ourselves, particularly in theatre, as a society still all-white, often unilingual and terribly homogenous" (Choinière). A coproduction of Festival TransAmériques and Choinière's company L'Activité, *Polyglotte* was intended to shake the festival-going public out of its comfort zones and make it confront its own "fantastic vision of Canada and Quebec" (Larochelle). Based on the 1960-1970s educational LPs, *Polyglot Method of French Conversation/ Méthode polyglotte de conversation anglaise*, intended for the new immigrants learning their second language, *Polyglotte* staged the irresolvable tension between the drama of arrival and the tragicomedy of the encounter between a new immigrant and the host country. Inspired by the forty lessons "repeated in both languages with different intonations" and creating "a touch of Big Brother in the disembodied language of those disks" (Choinière, Interview), *Polyglotte* provided the immigrant non-actors with the venue to express their astonishment and frustration with the new country. "[A]rmed with those phrases, [they] play the role of locals who guide the spectators toward Canadian citizenship" (Interview); so the post-*Charte des valeurs* audience of Quebec would realize that "to see ourselves collectively in 2015 through the gaze of the immigrant, of that Other who is part of us, is necessary. It is through him or her [a new immigrant] that I [Olivier Choinière; non-immigrant, white, male, Quebecois citizen] can get beyond my own clichés" (Interview). In its political and artistic statements, therefore, *Polyglotte* continued the work of theatre-artist immigrants, such as Mani Soleymanlou in Quebec or Carmen Aguirre in English Canada, who have made serious attempts to bring the immigrant topics out of the "minority theatre" box, the box created by the cultural and economic policies of multiculturalism, and to personally integrate in what we would call "a mainstream Canadian theatre."

The goal of this special issue is similar: collectively the articles aspire to reflect the rapidly changing social, cultural, and economic tendencies in Canadian society created by the culture of The Big Shift. They point at the increasing influx of artists-immigrants working

on Canadian and Quebecois stages. They demonstrate that the more visible and incessant the presence of these artists, the more powerfully their artistic and political project is articulated, the more often non-immigrant Canadian theatre artists will be compelled to consider the hardships of migration and to artistically investigate this experience themselves. Building imagined communities, however, takes time and effort. Today this project is still a utopia. This issue proposes to begin the conversation: it suggests that in the epoch of big shifts the practice of multilingualism, mapping and hospitality, reconciliation, and building imagined communities through the arts might become a life recipe for Canada and Quebec.

Notes

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- 2 See the special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* 55 (1988) edited by Natalie Rewa and entitled “Theatre and Ethnicity.”
- 3 The special issues include the 2009 “Performing Intercultural Canada,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 30.1-2, edited by Ric Knowles; and the 2013 “Canadian Performances / Global Redefinitions,” *Theatre Research in Canada* 34.1, co-edited by Gilbert Reid and Marc Maufort; the 2001 “Portraits d’auteurs,” *Jeu* 98.1, edited by Patricia Belzil; and the 2006 “Paroles d’auteurs,” *Jeu* 120.3, edited by Raymond Bertin.
- 4 During recent years, Harper’s government “cancelled the immigrant investor program; [. . .] tightened rules surrounding immigration for parents and grandparents; [. . .] rejigged the Citizenship Act, and [. . .] tackled marriage and refugee fraud” (Radia).
- 5 In my book *Performing Exile—Performing Self*, I identify exilic artist in the following terms: “These artists’ exilic flight and longing for return are exemplified in the processes of coming to terms with one’s artistic identity. This identity originates within the exilic artist’s gradual move from seeing oneself as an ethno-cultural and thus national subject in the past, at home; to recognizing oneself as a representative of a certain profession – a poet, a theater director, a writer, a dancer, or a filmmaker – someone whose life abroad, in the artist’s present, must be defined by what this person does, and not by what place, language, or cultural heritage this artist belongs to” (8-9).
- 6 Historically, the first step Canada had to take in the project of “Canadian nationalism” was distinguishing itself from the US (Wright ix-xiii), by reflecting a set of cultural and intellectual principles, the foundation of its “national consciousness”, as they have been suggested by such prominent Canadian artists and intellectuals as Margaret Atwood, Harold Innes, and Alex Colville (x). However, as Bashevkin writes, the project of Canadian nationalism started facing serious political and ideological divides since the early 1990s, as it was challenged by the rise of feminist, environmental, aboriginal and youth movements; and by the rapidly increasing number of immigrants coming to Canada (184-85).
- 7 The question of how the figure of Other/an immigrant is shaped in Canadian non-immigrant theatre by the writers, producers, directors, and fellow actors, who find themselves increasingly dealing with people of multiple origins, should be left for future exploration. This question is important but is beyond the scope of this issue.

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