

STEVEN BUSH

Conversations with George Luscombe

Toronto: Mosaic Press, 2012. 231pp. + Audio CD.

JACK WINTER

My TWP Plays: A Collection Including Ten Lost Years

Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2013. 321 pp.

JACK WINTER

The Tallis Bag

Ottawa: Oberon Press, 2012. 177 pp.

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The arrival of these three books, all within a year of one another, marks what may be the final episode in one of the most brilliant, and in the end, conflicted chapters in Canadian theatre history. From its founding in 1959, Toronto Workshop Productions (TWP) was the radical exception to the rule in Canadian theatre. Over three decades of institutional life, it produced dozens of theatrically innovative new works, but under the charismatic and demanding leadership of George Luscombe it had no interest in the historic project of building a Canadian dramatic canon that characterized the “alternative theatre” of the late twentieth century. Instead, Luscombe remained committed to the vision and practice of a left-wing theatre that was collectivist, robustly physical, and theatrically exhilarating to the end – a particularly bitter end as it turned out in 1986 when he was purged by the theatre he had founded.

TWP’s legacy is fragmentary – an archival collection of papers and scripts, lines on resumes, memories cherished by a dwindling population of theatre goers who endured the hard benches of George Luscombe’s Alexander Street theatre – but there remains a reputational struggle that continues in these books. At issue is the question of authorship and ownership of plays that, as Luscombe describes it to Steven Bush, “developed as we rehearsed on the stage,” a process in which the writer “would write *into* it [the play] as it was going on” (177).

As an actor, playwright, and director, Bush had himself experienced this process at TWP; he had seen his own work chopped up and reformed in Luscombe’s famously grueling creative regime, grounded in the hard work of Laban’s efforts and Stanislavski’s “Magic If” and an uncompromising political puritanism. It was a process that Maja Ardal mentions in Urjo Kareda’s testimonial memoir (one of several, including my own, that Bush appends to his conversations with Luscombe): “The playwright was never a strong presence in George’s space. [...] They were always hovering somewhere in the background. George was so afraid that we would dribble away in words what we could show with our bodies” (qtd. in Bush 195).

Writers are very much in the background in Steven Bush’s conversations with Luscombe; in fact they are rarely mentioned as the two men, comrades and collaborators, take the reader

through the process of theatrical analysis and physicality in the exploration of theatrical text. In these transcripts, Luscombe's voice comes through with a sense of immediacy: volatile, insistent, sometimes combative, and still charismatic. Bush adds marginal subtitles that serve as an easy key to concepts; the conversations may be richly anecdotal but they articulate a systematic approach to acting that insists that the work of the actor is an artisanal craft that demands rigour and analysis. They seem somewhat digressive on the page but the accompanying audio CD captures passion, warmth, and, indeed, excitement. Hearing it makes one wish that these two deeply knowledgeable actor-directors had recorded their chats on video.

If there was a playwright to be found hovering in the background, it was more often than not Jack Winter. His reminiscence of his work with Luscombe is one of the three sections that comprise *The Tallis Bag*, a memoir assembled from various previously published writings threaded together in a back-and-forth structure that jumps across time and topic in a manner that is not unlike his TWP plays. (The other two sections, labeled "Teacher" and "Jew," address his post-TWP life as an educator in England and his family and friends respectively). Winter draws our attention to a 1961 photograph (published in Neil Carson's *Harlequin in Hogtown*) that captures that hovering relationship: in it a young Luscombe speaks to his company, including Winter, who "lie on their backs in a semi-circle while their mentor strides above them in passionate exhortation, hands flexed as if to extract rather [than] to implant, more exorcist than inductor"(51).

Winter writes of Luscombe in an elegiac tone that is underscored by what comes across as unresolved anger, the familiar resentment, perhaps, of the overshadowed junior partner in a collaboration that produced truly magnificent work. Winter worked on a dozen shows in as many years with Luscombe, five of which he has gathered together in *My TWP*. They include works that are now legendary; *Before Compiègne* (1963), about Joan of Arc, and *The Mechanic* (1964), "a frothy topical thing" inspired by commedia dell'arte and Molière, in particular have been too long obscured (6). Luscombe worked with numerous writers over the years but none were as loyal, productive, and rewarding as Winter. They needed each other, and the blunt fact is that they did their best work when they worked together. Winter's memoir of Luscombe is remarkably honest and unsentimental, despite an uncomfortable sense of nursed injustices. His eye is sharp, and he provides the single most succinct description of Luscombe's theatricality, alluding to the bravura moment in *Ten Lost Years*: "actors on a flat stage flinging themselves from one static pool of light to another. The drama was in the black and bottomless spaces racing in between" (35).

There is a double meaning encoded in the title *My TWP*: this is the TWP that Winter experienced and which marked him, and this is the TWP that he claims as his right. When Winter joined forces with Luscombe he was a junior university professor with an unfinished PhD dissertation supervised by Northrop Frye, and as he recounts in his rather loquacious but highly affective memoir, he came to a crossroads and chose the uncertain future of the writer rather than the safe road of professorial tenure. As Luscombe's "factotum" he mastered the difficult art of writing *into*, of being what Rick Salutin later described as the "writer on – but not of" the play (113). He was in effect the first of what would later be called "dramaturges" in collective work. It would always be a position of ambivalence.

That ambivalence, the distance between writer on and playwright of, explains why the question of authorship and ownership is stressed today. Luscombe was the author of the

mise-en-scène in his exuberantly physical theatre, and Winter was the author of the textual arrangement, and in many but not all cases, the language spoken. This is a relationship that was resolved in other theatres by sharing credit; hence *The Farm Show* is by Paul Thompson and Theatre Passe Muraille; *1837: The Farmer's Revolt* is by Rick Salutin and Theatre Passe Muraille. This has become the naming convention in collective creations and truth be told, there is little at stake because most of them are rarely if ever restaged. This was, it seems, an untenable solution for both Luscombe and Winter. Luscombe always insisted that the plays he directed were unfinished and subject to revision, and thereby he denied his playwrights the satisfaction of seeing their work in print; Winter for his part seems to have been deeply invested in his identity as a writer, for which he had sacrificed a promising academic career.

Throughout his memoir and his anthology of plays from TWP, Winter recurrently refers to the “authorized” text, particularly in regards to *Ten Lost Years*, the 1974 hit based on Barry Broadfoot’s oral history of the Great Depression that for many was TWP’s greatest moment. For the last two decades, rights to the play have been tied up in legal wrangling because Winter had contested TWP’s right to give permission to *Canadian Theatre Review* to publish it, in a text laboriously assembled from archival drafts by Robert Wallace in 1983. Wallace used the scene divisions and titles from the production scripts; Winter eliminates them in the present text in order to restore the fluid movement of the action. That original publication, and its ensuing inclusion in *The CTR Anthology* in 1993, brought the play into public view and the occasional course syllabus, but production rights remained a continuing subject of dispute. A fragile agreement that would put all production royalties (if any) into a neutral fund collapsed in 1986 when TWP’s board, in one of the most shameful acts in Canadian theatre history, fired Luscombe and two years thereafter voted to disband the theatre. Winter’s claim to ownership may yet run into opposition from Luscombe’s estate, but my guess is that is unlikely unless someone proposes a major showcase production of *Ten Lost Years*. And how likely is that, forty years after the fact? Winter’s authorization comes at glancing collateral cost; in this new edition Cedric Smith—who first brought Barry Broadfoot’s book of oral histories of the Great Depression to Luscombe’s attention, who composed the music that gave the *Ten Lost Years* its melody and momentum, and who later released a vinyl recording of the songs from the show—is only acknowledged as a “principal creative collaborator” in a cursory footnote (186).

Reputation is particularly thin and short-lived in Canadian theatre. Forty years after *Ten Lost Years*, even Luscombe’s name is fading from theatre memory. At my university, students who perform in our George Luscombe Theatre listen patiently and nod politely when we invoke his spirit to encourage an understanding of disciplinarity. These books may go some way to perpetuating reputation for Luscombe and Winter; their work deserves to be remembered and honoured, and there is much to be learned from it yet. But perhaps the real value here is the restoration of the plays, however authorized, to the canon of Canadian drama, and perhaps, some day, a return to the stage.

Works Cited

- Salutin, Rick. “1837: *The Farmers’ Revolt*: Preface.” *Modern Canadian Plays*, rev. ed. Ed. Jerry Wasserman. Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1986. 103-13. Print.