

JORDAN TANNAHILL

Theatre of the Unimpressed: In Search of Vital Drama.

Toronto: Coach House Books, 2015. 160 pp.

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About a month ago, I started playing a game with my favourite theatre date: every time I could foresee the very next moment that might occur in a production I tapped his knee, and every time that prediction came true, I kicked his heel. This footsie offers a distraction from what playwright Jordan Tannahill, in his provocative essay collection *Theatre of the Unimpressed*, identifies as the “disillusion[ment] about the thing I had dedicated my life to” (12). Tannahill looks closely and productively at the terrain of “Unimpressive Theatre,” searching for the language to describe the potential vitality and energy of a more affective experience.

Theatre of the Unimpressed documents the results of a process that saw Tannahill, the wunderkind of Canadian theatre and winner of the 2014 Governor General’s Award for Drama, “answer two main questions”: first, what are the factors that contribute to the Theatre of the Unimpressed (or, in other words, what is making English Canadian theatre so boring?); and second, what are the “consistent trends” of the vital theatre (or, what is happening in the stuff that seems to be resonant and impressive?) (13). The book identifies a series of incisive responses to the former of Tannahill’s two overarching questions. Unfortunately, it falls short of offering a more lucid and long-lasting contribution because of the formulation of its latter question—when the book only identifies “trends,” it dilutes distinct and complex dramaturgies into a project that seems to endorse the application of broad stylistic codes.

The achievement of this book is its ability to pinpoint the local conditions and dramaturgical habits that have generated a “prevailing predictable theatre that’s risk averse and wary of failure” (13). Tannahill addresses dramatic structures that have stifled playwrights, cultural conditions that limit producers and programmers, and approaches to staging that generate apathetic disengagement in audiences. But it is when Tannahill’s anecdotes lead to concrete proposals for change that the reflective style takes on a more potent activism. In the essay “Boredom: The Boring Play,” a thrilling close-read of a failed orgy provokes the author to craft some proposals for a “resonant theatre” rooted in risk, rigour, and relevance to the cultural and socio-political contexts in which it is produced (31). Tannahill makes another active proposal in “Theatre is Where Frightened Filmmakers Go to Die”: “there is a fundamental question playwrights need to ask themselves when the idea for a play presents itself: does this idea need to unfold in real time before an audience? In other words, is this actually a play?” (93). In “Museum Theatre,” Tannahill loops back to his discussion of the boring play, advocating for a release from the practices of “theatrical taxidermy” (63). These are only some of the descriptors, questions, and proposals that are wholly resonant and unforgettable in this book—Tannahill develops imagistic language that can provoke conversations about theatre making in the rehearsal hall, classroom, and greenroom.

These proposals, however, emerge out of a myopic methodology of “informal polling” (13) and conversation that Tannahill undertook over the course of one year. What would have made this work more arresting is an acknowledgement of other practitioner-theorists who have developed similar propositions, beyond Sarah Ruhl, whose 2014 collection *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write* is referenced multiple times. For example, director Anne Bogart considered the function of eroticism in developing vibrant theatrical work as early as 2001 in her book *A Director Prepares*. In 1986, Elliot Hayes identified that a “workshop syndrome” was producing a state of stasis in the production of relevant new Canadian work. And ever since 1968, when Peter Brook published *The Empty Space*, there has been an attempt to pinpoint what theatre scholar Erin Hurley terms the “feeling-technologies” that, for Brook, produced “deadly” (9), “holy” (42), “rough” (65), and “immediate” (98) theatre. Some very impressive people have been writing about unimpressive theatre for some time, so what new contribution does this book make to that conversation?

It is Tannahill's placement of Canada's *impressive* works alongside the work of more celebrated continental European performance that makes this book powerful and affirming: Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA's Disabled Theatre is discussed alongside Cliff Cardinal's *Huff*, while productions like Rimini Protokoll's *Quality Control*, Geoff Sobelle's *The Object Lesson*, and Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* are given placement parallel to a discussion of Ravi Jain's *A Brimful of Asha*. In referencing these works Tannahill attempts to answer his book's second question about the “consistent trends” of the vital theatre. The issue is that Tannahill's lumped listing of these projects makes the important breakthroughs they represent seem only “trendy.” In fact, the post-dramatic techniques and strategies imbedded within each of these works are distinct formative aesthetic proposals that readers familiar with Tannahill's oeuvre can see have influenced his own practice. As such, I found myself yearning for a discussion of how Richard Maxwell's strategy of “affectless neutrality” finds resonance in Tannahill's production of *Concord Floral* or in his experience directing the young actor Sahra Del, for example. Instead, the listing of different productions that inspired Tannahill starts to read a bit like a Top 40 of the “hipster theatre” (123) (or just like a Harbourfront Centre World Stage season). Though Tannahill defends himself against this label by saying that he “is not interested in, nor [...] articulating, a stylistic trend of the cynical or ironic,” he never quite articulates the specific strategies that can be gleaned from the collection of productions he cites as impressive (123).

Despite these deficits, *Theatre of the Unimpressed's* historicization of the *near-present* theatrical moment makes for a refreshing read that gives space to voices in Canadian performance that are doing ground-breaking work, but are underrepresented in print. The book builds upon Tannahill's 2013 contribution to Praxis Theatre's online blog, which sparked an extraordinary discussion about the “anti-canon” of Canadian theatre—locating performances that had been “neglected or overlooked from the canon, based on (among other things no doubt) the difficulty of conveying their totality on the page.” There is a generosity in this labour: in a book about unimpressive work one finds that Tannahill cannot stop referencing performances that have impressed him. That spirit of optimism marks this book as a breath of fresh air—a welcome contribution that advocates for creators, audiences, and lovers of theatre to stop the games of distraction, and once more recognize the stage's potential for transformation.

Works Cited

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- Hayes, Elliot. "Stasis: The Workshop Syndrome." *Canadian Theatre Review* 49 (1986): 36-40. Print.
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LOUIS PATRICK LEROUX and CHARLES R BATSON, Eds.

Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries.

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 2016. 363 pp.

JOE CULPEPPER

In January 2017, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey announced that it would be closing its tents after 146 years, marking the end of the elephant-infused "Greatest Show on Earth." Concurrently, another kind of circus is thriving, as reflected in the dominance of Quebec's acrobatics-focused circus industry across the globe. This shift highlights the triumph of Guy Laliberté, who studied P.T. Barnum's model, eliminated the animals, and transformed a band of fellow Quebecois street performers into Cirque du Soleil in 1984. His company, which sold for approximately 1.5 billion dollars in 2015, is a hybrid of American entrepreneurialism, the *nouveau cirque* aesthetic of 1960s France, and non-western circus influences from China to Russia. *Cirque Global*, the first collection of critical essays devoted to circus in Quebec, offers a timely look at a sea change in live variety entertainment.

Editors Louis Patrick Leroux and Charles R Batson have brought leading scholars in the field into dialogue with circus artists, coaches, and archivists, among others. These perspectives are woven together to create what Batson aptly describes as a "sharp analysis of the multiple tales of origin, transmission, and disruption marking Quebec's contemporary circus scenes" (xvii). In addition to Cirque du Soleil, lesser-known yet equally innovative companies such as Cirque Éloize, Les 7 doigts de la main, and Machine de Cirque receive critical attention.

The collection is divided into five sections, each containing three thematically related essays. Pascal Jacob opens the first section, "Quebec on Planet Circus," by placing Quebec's story into the broad context of contemporary circus influences dating back 250 years in England, France, Germany, America, and the former Soviet Union. Leroux follows with a lucid deconstruction of "cirque" as a cultural term and performance category that points to the multilingual exchange of circus cultures in Quebec, Canada, and the United States. Julie Boudreault's essay "Are Quebec Circuses of Foreign Origin?" rounds off this historical contextualization; her meticulous documentation of American circuses that toured Quebec between 1846 and 1967 is a highlight.