

# Defying the Monolingual Stage / Bousculer la scène unilingue

ART BABAYANTS AND NICOLE NOLETTE

“Speaking one language, I submit, is like living in a house with one window.”  
Tomson Highway (r8)

In early April 2017, Toronto’s Modern Times Theatre invited a diverse group of artists, scholars, and critics to join a discussion about diversity in Canadian theatre practices. One of the panels moderated by the Artistic Director of Cahoots Theatre, Marjorie Chan, focused on languages and accents on stage. Each of the discussants proposed their own set of questions: How can minority languages be represented on stage? Should they be translated? What is the role of subtitles and what kind of sub/surtitles should be used? Who is allowed to use which language? For instance, can hearing actors use ASL on stage or should they let deaf actors perform roles that require ASL? Should immigrant actors who learned English as adults be expected to speak English without a marked accent? Why do Canadian audiences and critics find it difficult to accept “non-native sounding” actors performing characters that are expected to have an “unmarked” accent? Why are they expected to have an “unmarked accent”? While the discussants did not see eye to eye on many of these issues, it was clear that they all shared the view that professional Canadian theatre companies and Canadian theatre schools are currently doing a rather poor job at fostering linguistic and phonetic diversity on stage. It also became clear that the question of using multiple languages on stage is profoundly intertwined with the question of accents, dialects, the issues of accent/language perception, as well as race and race perception, the problem of power distribution, and, last but not least, the aesthetic choices of every single production.

This special issue dedicated to stage multilingualism in Canada reflects on this complexity while pondering the future of multilingual stage practices in the *de jure* bilingual but *de facto* multilingual country. It is difficult to over-emphasize how important it is to give voice to those scholars and artists attempting to work bi- or multilingually and/or to push against both the dominance of English and the monolingual or monocultural silos constituting the famous Canadian “mosaic.”

Despite the country’s official commitment to diversity, it seems that the issue of stage multilingualism has largely been absent from Canadian theatre research up until very recently, with a few notable exceptions. In 2000, Julie Byczynski contributed a short piece to *Canadian Theatre Review* reflecting on the use of foreign languages in English Canadian theatre. Marvin Carlson’s *Speaking in Tongues* remains to this day the broadest study of multilingual theatre, and it includes a few examples of Canadian plays and productions with a particular focus on the use of French and English in one production. In Canada, Louise Ladouceur (“Bilinguisme et création”; “Bilinguisme et performance”) has written extensively on bilingual work (French and English), particularly on how translation is used in the theatre of Western Canada’s francophone minori-

## INTRODUCTION

ties. The first Canadian book fully dedicated to multilingual theatre work was Nicole Nolette's monograph *Jouer la traduction. Théâtre et hétérolinguisme au Canada francophone*, which theorizes issues of translation, specifically playful translation, in French Canadian theatre outside of Quebec. Finally, in the latest issue of *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches théâtrales au Canada*, Michèle Laliberté wrote about surtitling multilingual theatre in the digital age.

While translation and bilingualism (mainly, English-French bilingualism) remain the principal foci of Canadian research on stage multilingualism, other themes are beginning to emerge. There is a growing interest in the presence of indigenous language on stage (see both Karpinski and Smith in this volume), in the issue of Canadian actors performing in their second language (Manole; Samur in this volume), and in the possibility of bilingual theatre education in Canada (see Heywood and Houle in this volume). This special issue of *TRIC/RTAC* is the first attempt to give space to the multiplicity of positions on the use of various languages in Canadian theatre. Simultaneously, this issue represents an attempt to theorize multilingual theatre, searching for fitting vocabulary and terminology. Even the word "multilingual" is not universal. Theatre scholars writing in English often equate multilingualism with polyglossia—an English translation of the Russian "raznorechiye"—a Bakhtinian term indicating various discourses rather languages. Canadian research in French, on the other hand, sidesteps Bakhtin's terms as translated in France: Olivier's (Bakhtine) vague "plurilinguisme"<sup>1</sup> encompasses both "raznorechiye" and "raznojazychie" while Todorov divides the Russian words into "hétéroglossie," "hétérologie," and "hétérophonie." Other researchers working in French often use the terms "hétérolinguisme" (Ladouceur "Bilinguisme et performance"; Nolette) and "colinguisme" (Leclerc; Beddows) in opposition to "unilinguisme" (Larose).

Equally important are the concepts of "Otherness" or "Foreignness" prominent in post-colonial and diaspora studies, specifically as they relate to languages, dialects or accents. For instance, French might be perceived as foreign by many English-speaking Canadians and at the same time it is the mother tongue of 7.3 million Canadians (Statistics Canada). We may also consider the fact that in many Canadian urban centres a large percentage of the population uses an immigrant language as their main home language.<sup>2</sup> Thus, what is perceived as alien or foreign by some (even the majority) may be seen as local and familiar to others. The cultural and linguistic mosaic of Canada defies any simplistic attempts of "othering." At the same time, political structures privileging the two official languages (both being non-indigenous tongues) over any other languages contribute to how power and resource distribution can play out on the federal, provincial, and municipal levels (see Dagenais). This affects the issues of funding that eventually reflect why certain languages of power are being constantly more privileged on stage than any other tongues. All these questions find reflection in the articles and forum pieces of this special issue.

Nous amorçons cette réflexion sur le plurilinguisme théâtral en traitant de la traduction, la pratique permettant souvent d'accommoder des spectateurs qui ne maîtrisent pas tous les codes linguistiques du spectacle. **Cassandra Silver** explore l'enjeu de la traduction, par Martin Kevan, du spectacle *Ne blâmez jamais les Bédouins* de René-Daniel Dubois. Comme l'explique Silver, le spectacle plurilingue et postdramatique déstabilise la notion de la traduction comme transfert textuel entre deux langues et deux cultures. La traduction de Kevan pour le Canada anglais intègre toutefois le modèle théâtral dominant de cet espace : un réalisme psychologique qui prône le multiculturalisme. Pour sa part, **Maryse Sullivan** explique comment une auteure de théâtre bilingue peut elle-même s'auto-traduire en cours de création. Madeleine Blais-Dahlem, l'auteure

fransaskoise qu'elle étudie, signe par exemple la pièce *La Maculée/s/Tain*, pensée puis publiée en français et en anglais en un seul recueil. Sullivan fait l'hypothèse que les différences entre les deux textes publiés côte à côte ne peuvent pas être lues comme la poétique bilingue d'un seul texte, et qu'il faut plutôt creuser le péritexte du recueil et ses textes séparément.

Alors que Silver et Sullivan font part d'un désir d'accommodement par la traduction dans le théâtre plurilingue du Québec et de la Saskatchewan, **Aida Jordão** situe sa propre expérience de créatrice de théâtre pour la scène et pour l'objet-livre dans la perspective de la non-traduction et de la résistance prônée par Byczynski. Elle documente ainsi la part de vraisemblance et d'illusion théâtrale à l'œuvre dans la dramaturgie. En contrastant la production de sa pièce *Funeral in White* en portugais et en anglais en 1991 et sa publication dans une anthologie d'écrits lusocanadiens en 2013, Jordão remarque une anglicisation croissante de la communauté lusocanadienne de Toronto, qui va de pair avec la place grandissante que prend l'anglais dans la version publiée de la pièce. **Eva Karpinski** théorise plus amplement la résistance de la non-traduction en prenant pour exemples les pièces *yagayab.two.womyn.black.griots* de debby young et naila belvett, *Mother Tongue* de Betty Quan et *Chocolate Women Dreams the Milky Way* de Monica Mojica. Dans son examen de ces textes où percent des langues minorisées au Canada (le cantonais, la langue des signes américaine, le patois jamaïcain, l'espagnol et le guna), elle propose que ce soit dans la mise à contribution d'un plurilinguisme radicalement expansif, et non limité à de rares emprunts, que se dévoile le véritable potentiel critique et réparateur du théâtre plurilingue.

Le dossier inclut également une compilation de perspectives autochtones recueillies par **Annie Smith**. Au lendemain des appels à l'action de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada, il devient de plus en plus urgent de prendre en compte les langues autochtones sur les scènes canadiennes, d'appuyer le foisonnement linguistique qui habite ces créateurs de théâtre.

Une série de pièces de forum complète le dossier en interpellant des créateurs et des pédagogues de théâtre plurilingues. Une entrevue de **Geneviève Robichaud** avec PME-Art de Montréal vient compléter la part postdramatique de l'article de Silver en traitant de l'hospitalité des langues du spectacle. **Sebastian Samur** évoque son expérience de comédien-dramaturg dans la production plurilingue « *In Sundry Languages* » et interviewe le metteur en scène Art Babayants. **Jennifer Heywood** et **Gabrielle Houle** résument quelques approches pédagogiques bilingues du théâtre au Canada en convoquant un dialogue entre Daniel Mroz de l'Université d'Ottawa, Louis Patrick Leroux de l'Université Concordia et de l'École nationale de cirque, Guillaume Bernardi du Collège Glendon de l'Université York et François St-Aubin de l'École nationale de théâtre du Canada.

It is our hope that this volume will diversify and problematize current approaches to investigating stage multilingualism in Canada. By bringing new voices, languages, terms, themes, and points of view into the conversation, we, the editors of this special issue, endeavour to broaden the discussion and move it beyond the questions of bilingualism, identity politics, and the “two solitudes” that up to this point have been defining as far as Canadian multilingual theatre is concerned.

## Notes

- 1 Interestingly, research in applied research in linguistics, particularly socio- and applied linguistics, is currently advocating a different use of the term “plurilingualism.” Plurilingualism is a word coined not to replace multilingualism as an idea but rather to propose a different theoretical framework to understand multilingual speakers: “It focuses on the individual’s ability to make use of two or more languages in speaking, reading and writing at varying levels of competence and in varying contexts. It is assumed that these languages do not coexist in separate silos in a person’s mind, but that they form a composite competence. [ ... ] This view thus challenges normative, more traditional concepts such as that of a mother tongue or foreign languages” (Grommes and Hu 2).
- 2 For instance, according to the *Globe and Mail*, 1.8 million Torontonians, 600,000 Montrealers, and 712,000 Vancouverites use an immigrant language at home on a regular basis.

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*Polyglotte*, spectacle bilingue/bilingual performance, coproduction de l'Activité et du Festival Transamériques, Montréal, 2015; Photo: Olivier Bochenek