

KAILIN WRIGHT, ed.

The God of Gods: A Canadian Play
By Carroll Aikins: A Critical Edition.

University of Ottawa Press, 2016. 138 pp.

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Problematical in contemporary Canadian theatre critique is the considerable archive of plays written before the mid-twentieth century—particularly those whose subjects seem to be politically intolerable. Why bring back, for example, a hundred-year old “noble savage” play that might be dismissed as merely inauthentic, even racist, by today’s standards? Certainly such avoidance silences a remarkably fruitful body of early performance endeavour and consequently limits full and necessary expression of current historical and theatrical discourse.

More than ever now, with the burgeoning in Canadian drama and criticism, we need to bring forward selected works from the modernist archive, works culturally significant in their day and capable of meaningfully engaging with present theatrical discussion. As for intolerance, we might benefit from demonstrating something of what John Fletcher, in his article “Sympathy for the Devil,” has called “critical generosity—avowed sympathy with the causes of one’s subjects” (210).

The key is to accompany these early works with balanced historical analysis and interrogation that carefully enunciates contextual linkages between past and present. Such a project, and a very good one it is, is the recent publication of *The God of Gods: A Canadian Play*, edited by Kailin Wright. This is a critical edition of a play written by Carroll Aikins that premiered at England’s Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1919, was followed by a remount there in 1920, then played at Hart House Theatre in Toronto in 1922 and revived at London’s Everyman Theatre in 1931. British commentators used words such as “rare artistic delicacy” and “first drama written by a Canadian to be presented in England,” while Canadian critic Hector Charlesworth called it “a fairly good start for the Canadian drama” when it played in Toronto.

The book is a publication of the University of Ottawa Press in its Canadian Literature Collection, a series of critical editions of nineteenth-to-mid-twentieth century literary texts that are out of print or unpublished (also included and relevant: Oscar Ryan’s *Eight Men Speak*, edited by Alan Filewod, and Bertram Brooker’s *The Wrong World: Selected Stories and Essays*, edited by Gregory Betts). All are ventures of Editing Modernism in Canada, a collaborative assembly of mainly Canadian researchers who publish critical editions of modernist Canadian works, a group that Wright acknowledges for their editorial assistance.

Wright has assembled a robust package of scholarly materials to enhance the re-publication of the play. Along with a general introduction to Aikins outlining his theatrical achievement—he wrote other plays and operated a theatre school in an up-to-date art theatre building on his fruit farm near Naramata, BC—there are scene-by-scene annotations of the set designs, performance variants, as well as character and line explications,

plus many useful cultural perspectives. One of these presents evidence that Aikins may have based textual details on the Syilx People of the local Okanagan area.

Also included are textual notes elucidating the variants of the text—and indeed the title of the play as it appeared in the three cities of its four productions. Finally, there is a dossier of reviews and photocopied playbills, all amounting to a wealth of primary evidence, textual and visual, for determining the impact of the play in its early twentieth-century appearances—notably distinguishing the mixed critical reception between the productions, from its generally appreciated premiere in Birmingham (“Magic at the Empire”) to sceptical reception in Toronto (“curiously uneven”) and London (“a charade”)—as well as proposing its place in present critical landscapes.

Wright admits that her effort is somewhat of a salvage project as she struggles to account for the play’s success, especially given the nagging issues recognized even by many early commentators: its uncertain ethnographies, faux language, reductive characterizations, ever changing musical scores, and vague stage settings. The critical strength of the book is her well-outlined apparatus, a modernist take on the play as a self-reflexive aesthetic. This is expressed mainly through the “onstage artist-audience figure” of the character Yellow Snake, a “singer” who both participates in the action and also observes it from a privileged vantage point, effectively critiquing the social context while poetically formulating a mythic, superior world. As for the *mise-en-scène*, *The God of Gods*, in its general lack of specificity, left plenty of room for creativity, in effect allowing elements of theatrical expressionism in its acting, lighting, and scenery (costuming choices, cyclorama effects, abstracted settings). Wright makes the claim that Aikins utilized the innovative work of 1920s Soviet Russian agitprop theatre as well as anticipated the 1930s Canadian multimedia work of Herman Voaden’s symphonic expressionism.

Further to the thesis that Aikins was innovative and anticipated modernist forms, the play dramatizes a particular philosophical motif. Aikins, like many of his contemporaries working in the arts in the 1920s, was a theosophist¹, believing in the high ideals of tolerance and equality, especially pertaining to matters of religion and cultural practice. Thus Yellow Snake poetically articulates a utopian place he calls Hidden Water and proposes to take Suiva, the female protagonist, there as his partner, while simultaneously, and dangerously, revealing the “tribe’s” crass materialism and religious worship of a false idol—thus leading to the melodramatic deaths of the two lovers.

In an extended discussion of primitivism, Wright accounts for the superficiality of many of the production elements, both the dramaturgical and the staged, as gesturing “towards the artificiality and theatricality of the audience’s own culture” (xxiv). Thus a utopian past critiques a dystopian present. A concluding discussion titled “Adapting Nietzsche” is provocative in suggesting that the play be seen as Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* marshalling sundry art forms to represent, finally, the clash between Apollonian and Dionysian forces. Yellow Snake could thus be seen as a kind of intuitive, Nietzschean superman, an artist-lover-prophet who declares a possible resolution between community and landscape, humankind and nature, becoming, as such, the true god of gods.

Illuminating history, an excellent gloss, provocative thoughts, all very well stated: Wright has indeed made *The God of Gods* a highly readable, and necessary, “rich subject of inquiry.”

Notes

- 1 In her Introduction, Wright explains how the Canadian Theosophical Society placed “emphasis on ‘Truth’ and ‘tolerance to all’” and demonstrates how *The God of Gods* “dramatizes these key theosophical tenets: the play’s central characters perform monologues on tolerance and discoveries of religious truths—or untruths, as the female protagonist (Suiva) realizes that the community’s religious idol offers little more than stage tricks” (xxi).

Works Cited

Fletcher, John. “Sympathy for the Devil: Nonprogressive Activism and the Limits of Critical Generosity.” *Theatre Historiography: Critical Interventions*. Ed. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 2010.

NICOLE NOLETTE

Jouer la Traduction: Théâtre et hétérolinguisme au Canada francophone

University of Ottawa Press, 2015. 296 pp.

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There is something playful and ironic about writing a review of a book dedicated to the study of heterolingualism and translation in a different language from that of the manuscript. Such is the case with this review of Nicole Nolette’s *Jouer la traduction: Théâtre et hétérolinguisme au Canada francophone*, which focusses on contemporary theatrical texts in French Canada outside of Québec that encounter or create difference, and are written and performed in linguistic otherness. In particular, Nolette focusses on texts in translation, specifically investigating the notion of *la traduction ludique*. While Nolette chooses not offer a specific, concise definition of this term, she articulates the *qualities* of play and playfulness that exist within the medium of *traduction ludique*, and, citing Mathieu Guidère’s play theory, parallels the role of the actor with the role of translator. Specifically looking at translation in theatre, Nolette explains that, “La traduction ludique telle qu’elle se manifeste dans le théâtre franco-canadien hétérolingue relève de ce plaisir (ou *plaisir*) du jeu, que ce soit celui entre les langues ou celui des possibles de la représentation théâtrale” (19). For Nolette, translative play is more than wordplay or code mixing; *traduction ludique* is meta-theatrical, beyond the visual and spoken languages of the characters, and layered, offering a different experience to those who understand one or the other language, or both.

Nolette carefully and thoughtfully engages in dialogue with Derrida and Bhabha, identifying the double codedness of both cultural and linguistic translation. She explains that, “la traduction ludique met stratégiquement en place des espaces d’hybridation et de supplémentarité aux frontières poreuses, instables et dynamiques” (23). In her book *Traverser Montréal: Une histoire culturelle par la traduction*, Sherry Simon, whose work is prominently featured in Nolette’s study, describes cities as sites of translation that are constantly in