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### CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN NEWFOUNDLAND THEATRE: THE RISE OF THE GROS MORNE THEATRE FESTIVAL<sup>1</sup>

*Cet article est une exploration des forces qui se sont unies au sein du monde du théâtre à Terre-Neuve à partir de 1970 pour créer le succès que connaît aujourd'hui le Gros Morne Theatre Festival. Jusqu'à présent, peu de chercheurs se sont intéressés à la genèse des premiers festivals de théâtre à Terre-Neuve. Or, les événements comme celui de Gros Morne restent intimement liés aux premières formes indigènes d'expression culturelle à Terre-Neuve, et il importe qu'on s'y attarde.*



The theatre culture of Newfoundland, in both its history and modern practices, is distinct in many respects from that of the rest of Canada and even the Maritime provinces. Newfoundland's complex history prior to its relatively recent conjoining with the Canadian federation played a crucial part in the development of both urban and non-urban cultural expression. The region's tortured legacy as a resource-rich commodity, colony of the British Empire, and short-lived nation are elements which have conspired to create performance modes and an approach to the making of theatre which from its earliest manifestations demonstrated a transgressive approach to traditional colonial conventions with respect to the boundaries between spectator and performer. Rooted in traditional folk practices and attitudes influenced by the isolated nature of outport communities, the development of non-urban theatrical expression in Newfoundland is an area of study rich in potential for theatre scholars.

The history of professional theatre in Newfoundland is short and tumultuous and has its roots in the establishment of small, scattered settlements across the coastline of the island. The colonization of Newfoundland has been described by commentators such as G.M. Story as "deliberately retarded" (*Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* 12). The forces arrayed against its development were numerous: competing commercial interests centred in Bristol and London (Cell in Story, *Early* 101); a series of anti-colonizing policies of the British government enacted in 1634, 1661, and 1671 (O'Flaherty 30-42); French army raids on the English in 1696-7 and 1709 (Major 109-117); and a sequence of disasters that

included tidal waves, shipwrecks, destructive storms, and three catastrophic fires in the city of St. John's. Beginning with the arrival of Cabot on the *Matthew* in 1497, colonization in Newfoundland pursued a course as rocky as the island's coastline. The active advocacy of entrenched mercantile interests in England mitigated against anything more than a trickle of settlement for over two hundred years. Between 1637 and 1677 various measures were enacted by the Crown to discourage settlement, abetted by the fishing industry. Although the policies were inconsistent—the "six mile" rule was suspended in 1677, for instance—the effect was to threaten settlers already established on parts of the coastline and to diminish to a trickle the number of new settlers. Outports thus took shape as small, isolated communities, existing at the whim of a far-off government and left largely to their own devices for most of the year.<sup>2</sup> Settlers were careful to build their "tilts"—small, ramshackle shelters used primarily by hunters—well into the woods and away from the prying eyes of His Majesty's ships. Seasonal fishermen brought over from Bristol who wished to stay could not keep up permanent drying and salting facilities under the law, nor the appearance of a settlement. Nevertheless, a small trickle of immigrants defied the laws and began to congregate along the eastern and northern coastline throughout the late 1600s.

As settlement gradually picked up pace in the eighteenth century, this evolving pattern of avoidance—mirrored, ironically, by the island's aboriginal peoples, the Beothuk, who avoided contact with white settlers whenever possible—produced cultural manifestations. As outport communities slowly took shape, a culture of wariness towards outsiders took shape along with them. Although there was intermittent contact between communities, a lack of visible institutions or support from colonial authorities meant that these settlements largely fended for themselves.

One of the off-shoots of this requisite self-sufficiency was the community concert. Originally organized as a fundraising activity to aid local services, the concert (and its larger social cousin, the "Time") combined songs, sketches, dialogues, and recitations. Originally sponsored by a church or local benevolent organization, the show was moderated, and therefore mediated, by an insider—i.e., a locally-born individual—performing the role of "chairman," interacting directly with the audience and offering commentary on each sequence (Skinner 117). The community concert was indisputably local in orientation, although it could include material acquired from abroad. Popular song lyrics were

changed to include local references, scene dialogues inserted these references wherever possible, and the oral history of the community took centre stage through recitations and the highlighting of status relationships, often inverted or subverted, in the parceling out of roles to community members.

Many elements of what may be called professional indigenous theatre<sup>3</sup> in Newfoundland find their roots in the community concert. Aspects of its preparation remain a hallmark of the theatre culture today, although multiple reasons may be found for the maintenance of such practices. A truncated rehearsal period, the use of multipurpose spaces, the arbitrary changing of canonical or “established” text (localizing it through the addition of topical references or one of the island’s many dialects), the technique of direct address, the use of song as both a narrative and non-narrative device, and an intense level of spectator-performer interaction all stem from the practices of the concert.

A second basis of Newfoundland theatre culture arrived with folk traditions brought by emigrants from the English West Country, probably with Sir Humphrey Gilbert (Story 167). Mumming dates back in some cultures as far as perhaps the eleventh century and has a long and well-documented history in Devon, Dorset, Somerset, and Cornwall. Though there are many forms of mumming, as typologized by Herbert Halpert (34-61); he notes “[...]the form most closely bound to Newfoundland texts[...]”—and therefore its theatre is the “[...]Hero-combat Play” (57). The text of this performance is usually known as *The Play of St. George*, and it continued to take place in various disparate outport communities across the island even after the practice of mumming was banned in 1861 by the Newfoundland Legislative Assembly (Story, “Mummers” 179-181).

In *The Play of St. George* a group of mummers knocks at the door of a local resident. The knock alone is indicative of the visit of strangers.<sup>4</sup> A mummer speaks out in an ingressive voice: “Mummers allowed in?” If the occupants of the house agree to allow the Mummers in, they then enter. The play is performed in any space deemed big enough to allow for its rough-and-tumble physicality. Again, a large degree of spectator-performer interaction is assumed, and spectators in the Hero-combat play are often co-opted as performers. There is also much use of direct address and bolder spectators may engage in repartee with the performers. Indeed, perhaps most notable about this particular type of mumming is that the border between spectator and performer is almost erased. The performers *invade* the protected spectator

space (the home). There is no stage, no proscenium. While there may be a space between spectators and the performers, the performers are as likely to transgress that border as not, and to drag spectators across it as well.

Both the community concert and mumming are popular folk traditions. The activities of mumming, so closely linked to the status-reversal of the medieval Feast of Fools, and the community concert, with its inversion of status roles and its inclusion of popular performance modes, demonstrate a nascent theatre tradition derived from working class origins. These elements of folk culture, as well as such later traditions as music hall and vaudeville, have the objective of mocking gentrified attitudes and airs. As such they find a natural opposition in the entrenched mercantile and political interests of a community: that is, in Newfoundland, the emerging bourgeois and landed gentry of the island (Story, "Newfoundland" 12). As Newfoundland developed a proto-national identity in the late nineteenth century, two streams of cultural expression vied for dominance. On the one hand was the powerful influence of imported "high culture" in the form of visiting theatre troupes and the production of established plays; on the other was the developing community concert model which relied for its appeal on direct local references, song and sketch material, and participation. This competition would intensify in the latter part of the twentieth century. The arrival of a colonial theatre troupe in the 1950s, aptly-named the London Theatre Company and headed by Leslie Yeo, did nothing to aid the development of local writers and performers. Between 1951 and 1957 Yeo's troupe performed 107 plays. They employed one Newfoundland-born performer, who was recruited in England (Yeo 124) and, with the exception of their annual *Screech* revues, produced no Newfoundland plays.

The high culture model was perpetuated by the development of an active amateur theatre scene in St. John's, starting with the founding of the St. John's Players by playwright Grace Butt in 1937.<sup>5</sup> The Players were the first and most influential of the island's amateur theatre companies, dominating local and regional competitions for nearly forty years. Although they produced three works by local writers between 1940 and 1947, and strove to educate their performers through play readings and visits by instructors in aspects of performance (Soper 29-34), the Players can at best be credited with increasing the expectations of the local theatre audience and the capacities of its amateur actors. A truly indigenous theatre scene in St. John's would have to wait until the

1970s. The vast majority of productions of the St. John's Players were of British and Irish plays and the performance style was conventional when compared to contemporaneous theatre practice in Europe and the United States. Nevertheless, the production of F.R. Emerson's one-act play *Proud Kate Sullivan* in 1940 (48), and particularly Butt's full-length *The Road To Melton* in 1945—the first three-act local play produced in Newfoundland—and the same author's *New Lands* in 1947 (45), may be considered landmark events in the history of Newfoundland theatre.

With the advent of Confederation, Newfoundland became eligible to enter the Dominion Drama Festival. None of the competing amateur companies produced the work of a local playwright until 1952, when the Northcliffe Drama Club of Grand Falls revived an out-of-competition production of Fred Emerson's *Proud Kate Sullivan*. In 1956 Northcliffe presented an adaptation of Ted Russell's radio play *The Holdin' Ground*. However, these two offerings were exceptions to the rule. The Emerson play had been produced, as previously noted, by the St. John's Players in 1940, and Russell's *Holdin' Ground* had been produced on radio in 1954 and was written by the province's most famous radio humourist (Rose 4).

Nineteen sixty-seven marked the arrival of British emigré Michael Cook, a teacher and aspiring playwright of considerable charisma and erudition. Through the Extension programme at Memorial University, where he was employed, Cook began to influence a younger generation of students who had been touched, like other students across Canada, with a new nationalism. He began to write articles in the local press and the fledgling *Canadian Theatre Review* advocating for a local theatre scene stocked with local artists and producing local plays. Taking the matter into his own hands, he formed the Open Group with Clyde Rose and Richard Buehler in 1970 and began to produce his own plays. Three have become seminal examples of the emergent Newfoundland drama: *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* (1973), *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* (1973), and *Jacob's Wake* (1975).

As has been thoroughly documented elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Cook's efforts to establish a local professional theatre scene were joined by the work of Lynn Lunde and Chris Brookes. In 1972 Brookes and Lunde formed the Mummers Troupe, whose agit-prop, politicized theatre won no friends amongst the mandarins of the Culture Ministry. In 1973 the Mummers and Cook were boosted in their efforts by the explosive success of CODCO, a group of

Newfoundland-born performers who returned from a successful show of collectively-created material in Toronto to general acclaim in their home province (Peters, *CODCO*: xi). The commercial success of CODCO, along with the counter-culture work of the Mummies, the playwright-centred work of Cook and the Open Group, and the experience given young performers by Dudley Cox's Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company (Brookes 43), effectively created an alternative theatre scene in St. John's—even without the existence of a regional theatre to which it could pose an alternative.

The preceding forms the backdrop to the development of theatre on the west coast of Newfoundland. If, given the social and political history of the island, it is no surprise that a professional indigenous theatre arose as a response to neo-colonialist theatre practice which marginalized those outside the urban bourgeoisie, it is in some manner ironic that on the west coast of the island, where so many of the policies of the British and Canadian governments have proven detrimental to the population, colonialist traditions proved even more enduring.

While community concerts continued and vestigial evidence of mumming survived, theatre in the urban centres of Corner Brook and Stephenville had become resolutely colonial with the advent of amateur theatre groups like the Playmakers of Corner Brook. The arrival of British-born Maxim Mazumdar led to an explosion of professional theatre activity on the west coast (in 1976 he served as an adjudicator for the Provincial Drama Festival; he moved to Newfoundland in 1978). Within three years Mazumdar had established both the Stephenville Festival (in Stephenville) and Theatre Newfoundland Labrador (TNL) in Corner Brook (Brunner 1985: 56-62). These theatrical ventures were based on different elements of the model borrowed from Britain. Stephenville emulated the festival model used in establishing the Stratford and Shaw Festivals (in Ontario) and the Lennoxville Festival (in Quebec), while TNL was created along the lines of regional theatres established across Canada in the 1960s.

Mazumdar's arrival changed the course of west coast Newfoundland theatre. In this he was aided by the decline of the Dominion Drama Festival, which had disappeared by the time he arrived on the scene. Its demise left a large number of people in Corner Brook who had developed strong skills in such elements of theatre as set building, props construction, publicity, administration, and costume design, as well as a host of backstage technical

skills. Furthermore, the Playmakers had established a local audience for theatre, particularly through their popular *Home Brew* revue, a refinement of the outport community concert. While a conventional theatre practitioner of the British stripe, Mazumdar's accomplishment was to recognize that Newfoundland's cultural history had always involved an intense participation by the community in the making of a "show." They did not want simply to see the foreign and mainland performers who passed through Corner Brook and Stephenville, performing at the newly erected Arts and Culture Centres. Audiences were accustomed, through events like community concerts and mumming, to being part of the show.

With this in mind Mazumdar set up TNL, as noted, partly on the Canadian regional theatre model of the 1960s, but with its true function as a community-based organization. It remains so to this day. The company veers back and forth between professional and non-professional status: its community play and Youtheatre initiatives, which were the company's most popular programmes until the late 1990s, feature non-professionals. However, its Fall/Winter mainstage season in Corner Brook, now discontinued, featured performers in a mix of plays which followed the Canadian regional theatre formula—a formula well known in the 1970s for its dearth of Canadian (or Newfoundland) offerings. Mazumdar's particular innovation was the establishment of youth-training programmes at both TNL, in the fall and winter, and Stephenville, during its summer season. This was a first step in the establishment of a base of professional local professional performers.

The two companies managed to survive past their founder's death in 1991—a considerable achievement in the challenging economic climate—fuelled initially by Mazumdar's entrepreneurial zeal and then by considerable volunteerism on the parts of the communities of Corner Brook and Stephenville. However, both remained anomalies in the increasingly indigenous Newfoundland theatre scene due to their concentration on non-Newfoundland work and their steady importation of actors from the mainland. Unlike the St. John's based companies, ten hours away by car, the small towns of the west coast could not support a local population of professional actors.

On the East Coast the professional theatre had become sufficiently established by the mid-1970s that it could survive the demise of one company, the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company of Dudley Cox, and the fracturing of the Mummers into two entities, including the newly established Community Stage,

later known as Rising Tide Theatre (Brookes 180). Rising Tide took local theatre in a different direction. From its inception, it blended a populist outlook with festival theatre programming and the use of local artists and plays. The company's founder and Artistic Director, Donna Butt, borrowed from both the urban and outport aspects of Newfoundland theatre culture in creating a successful hybrid form.

In 1992 Rising Tide decided to shift its base of operations from St. John's—where its previous seasons had featured collectives and text-based plays at conventional theatre venues like the Arts and Culture Centre—to Trinity, a small community in Trinity Bay, where it established its highly successful "Summer in the Bight" Festival. While not the first of Newfoundland's summer theatre festivals, this initiative was far more ambitious in scope than Stephenville. Further, with its proximity to St. John's, it made use of—and helped develop—a wider base of professional theatre artists.

The Summer in the Bight Festival features a diverse array of performances: a "New Founde Land Pageant," a form pioneered by Grace Butt in tandem with the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company; songs and sketch comedy evenings, like the popular *Revue*, which take the form of the community concert and the *Screech* shows created by the London Players in the 1950s; collective plays modeled after the work of CODCO and the Mummies; and commissioned plays written by local and Canadian playwrights. As well Donna Butt's company featured new play development workshops that were focused on pieces being prepared for production. From this description of activities it is hard not to conclude that Rising Tide's success heralded the arrival of the first truly mainstream, home-grown regional theatre company in Newfoundland.

The rise of a successful theatre festival on the east coast occurred at a fortuitous time for TNL. Declining audience numbers for its fall and winter seasons forced the board of directors to look for ways in which the company could remain viable in a small community. The answer lay across the island in Trinity Bay, where, with a local population even smaller than that of Corner Brook's Bay of Islands region, the Summer in the Bight Festival was increasing its audiences dramatically every year. Donna Butt had expanded her target audience to include mainlanders and other visitors "from away."

Of course, the festival model could not be said to guarantee success; while Stephenville was surviving, it was hardly prosper-



ing. However, in contrast to Stephenville's stagnant mix of Broadway revues and mainland actors, *Rising Tide* was using primarily young performers and featuring more and more local material. The establishment in Corner Brook of a theatre training programme at Memorial University's Sir Wilfred Grenville College in 1988 offered similar promise of a pool of young, trained actors. South of Corner Brook lay Stephenville, with its well-established festival. The route, then, would lie north.

The Great Northern Peninsula possesses its own rich history, one which includes the initial landing of the Vikings in North America at what is now L'Anse aux Meadows, early Paleo-Indian settlement in the area around Port Au Choix, the medical voyages of Wilfred Grenfell, and the inspirational stories of outpost nurses like Myra Bennett. In August 1973 the Peninsula had even, inadvertently, become part of the island's theatre activity: the Mummers Troupe descended on Sally's Cove as that community faced expropriation at the hands of the federal government, which had embarked on the process of creating a new national park and with it the forced movement of some communities, and the elimination of others, within its boundaries (Brookes 78-96). As Alan Filewod has noted, the resulting protest production, *Gros Mourn*, changed nothing in the course of the establishment of Gros Morne National Park, but it proved to be a watershed in the work of the Mummers (122).

It fell to Varrick Grimes, the Artistic Associate at TNL in 1995, to conceive of a theatre festival devoted to local works on the Great Northern Peninsula. In an interview conducted for this article, Grimes noted that at the time he felt that Theatre Newfoundland Labrador, while possessed of a all-encompassing title, had never adequately represented the entire region of Newfoundland, much less Labrador.<sup>7</sup> A graduate of the theatre programme at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Grimes felt he could draw on a pool of talented young actors eager to find fulfilling work close to home. The startling success of the Summer in the Bight Festival was setting a new template for theatrical work in the province. All these factors, added to Grimes's restless ambition and strongly-held belief in the importance of Newfoundland culture, created a set of conditions which enabled him to ignite the interest of TNL's board of directors. Arguing his position with enthusiasm, and volunteering to take on the initial responsibilities involved, Grimes was given the go-ahead by TNL's board to scout out the cultural terrain of Gros Morne Park in 1995.

By this point Newfoundland had the beginnings of a written theatre history, not only with the publication of Chris Brookes's *A Public Nuisance* (1988) but as a result of a series of articles published in *Canadian Theatre Review*, *This Magazine*, and the *Atlantic Advocate*, amongst others, between 1970 and 1995. An anthology of CODCO plays had been published,<sup>8</sup> two more anthologies were in the final stages of preparation,<sup>9</sup> and a conference on Newfoundland drama in 1992 had created a groundswell of interest in documenting the development of theatre in the region. Donna Butt's festival in Trinity Bay had created a model which could be borrowed from, if not copied. It was an auspicious time to explore the possibilities of a theatre festival dedicated to homegrown work.

Grimes had read Chris Brookes's history of the Mummers Troupe and took particular interest in the section on the creation of *Gros Mourn*. He was also influenced through having read Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which deals with Boal's work with disenfranchised communities in Brazil. Travelling from community to community on the Great Northern Peninsula, interviewing older citizens and committing their stories to tape, Grimes shared Brookes's perspective on preserving Newfoundland's cultural legacy (if not his training in political theatre). In addition, it could be said that by 1995 there was now what could fairly be considered a modern indigenous performance style based on an amalgam of traditional cultural sources, oriented towards collective creation and audience-performer interaction, with a particular emphasis on giving new life to local history. However, Grimes was constrained to some extent in his ambitions. He was, after all, an employee of a much more conservative organization than the Mummers had been. If theatre was going to flourish amidst the razor-sharp rocks of the Long Range Mountains under the auspices of TNL, he would have to tread carefully.

Grimes had already successfully integrated traditional Newfoundland material into TNL's programming. As TNL's Youtheatre coordinator, he had successfully produced two of the "Jack" plays based on traditional Newfoundland folktales rediscovered and reworked by Andy Jones in collaboration with the company Sheila's Brush (Peters *Stars* xxiv-xxvi). However, Grimes had bigger plans. Each summer, TNL's Artistic Director Jerry Etienne joined the acting company of the Atlantic Theatre Festival (ATF) in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. During these periods TNL lay fallow. Grimes suggested a project whereby a production would be

collectively created and mounted in a Northern Peninsula community. TNL's board of directors were supportive, and Grimes and stage manager Helen Himsl headed "down the coast" (that is, northward) to scout out possible locations in the late spring of 1995.

Grimes presented his ideas to the board as a first step in a template that would enact the regional theatre mandate of TNL and recreate the summer success of Stephenville, while developing the work of Newfoundland playwrights in a much more focused manner than either company had done before. Grimes envisaged a programme that would combine the community activism of the Mummies and the local popularity of the Summer in the Bight Festival. All of these four balls were to be juggled on a tiny budget siphoned from TNL's already meager operating grant for the fall season. Support from agencies like the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) would await results of the first endeavour.

Grimes and some of his fellow graduates at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College had already made an initial attempt at collective creation in 1994. For a piece entitled *Raspberries and Tinned Milk*, Grimes and a cast of young performers interviewed locals and collected their stories on tape. The actors took on the voices and behaviour of the interviewees during several weeks of rehearsals in which the structure and material were created for the show under Grimes's supervision. The show toured the southwest coast with funding support from Donna Butt. This proved a crucial step in Grimes's artistic maturation; he learned firsthand the mechanics of collective creation—as well as the challenges of producing a show several nights a week on the road in different communities and at venues of different sizes and configurations. Further, he now had a small, loyal group of talented performers skilled in Keith Johnstone-style improvisation techniques and collective creation. This initial company of actors helped forge a mutually beneficial association between the theatre training programme at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College and what was soon to become the fledgling Gros Morne Theatre Festival (GMTF), a link which continues to this day.

What Grimes and company needed at this point was the right *story*. Grimes was introduced to Ed English, a tourism officer for the west coast, whose father featured prominently in a famous piece of local history: the sinking in 1919 of the postal ship S.S. Ethie off waters near Sally's Cove. Grimes was intrigued by the story and asked his room-mate, Shane Coates, to draft a treatment

of a play based on the story. Coates, an aspiring poet native to the peninsula, had never written a play. Working with the actors and using techniques borrowed from Boal, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Chicago's Story Theatre, they created *Ethie*. According to Coates, "We never thought it would go, but it had a little motor in it. The audiences loved it. I kept trying to kill it, but each year it kept coming back."

Grimes contacted officials in Woody Point, Rocky Harbour, and Cow Head, three outports located as enclaves within Gros Morne National Park. Cow Head agreed to host the play at the Shallow Bay Motel. The owner, Darel House, stipulated two conditions: the play had to be produced as dinner theatre, ensuring him a profit regardless of box office, and it had to include Daniel Payne, a local musician. Grimes invited the teenaged fiddler to Corner Brook and found him to be a talented improviser, a powerful singer, and a brilliant fiddler. Payne, the eldest child in a family of talented artists, is now a key figure in the current renaissance of traditional music on the island. *Ethie* was produced for two nights in August 1995 to a total audience of 128 (TNL). Given that the published population of Cow Head is a mere 450, and that TNL had few resources to publicize the play to a potential tourist audience, the numbers represented a modestly successful beginning.

In 1996 Grimes returned to the region, determined to engage more communities along the peninsula's western coast. Rehired by TNL, he headed to Gros Morne Park for community-input meetings in Norris Point, Rocky Harbour, and Cow Head to determine the site of the festival's home and to set up local committees. All three communities were positive to these overtures, but only Cow Head was willing to commit to the process of establishing a festival. Norris Point, a more affluent community, and Rocky Harbour, the established tourist centre of the park, had little incentive to alter their approaches to tourism. Cow Head, set back from the Viking Trail highway and less ideally situated for tourist purposes, could benefit from such an attraction.

In providing the physical support critical to the establishment of the festival, Darel House perceived an opportunity for a business deal with benefits extending in three directions. The theatre would have a home and a base of operations, and Cow Head merchants would profit from the summer-long presence of actors, directors, and theatre-goers. House himself intended to develop the dinner theatre aspect of the operation for his own benefit, and would also profit from increased trade at the motel. An unused second-hand goods store beside his motel was leased to TNL for a

dollar a year to serve as a conventional theatre and alternate venue to the dinner theatre taking place in the bar of the motel. House oversaw initial renovations to the building at his own expense. He took an active part in promoting the festival and was helpful in securing accommodation in Cow Head for half of the company's performers. The other half, led by Helen Himsl, decamped to Rocky Harbour (Buckle, 8 September 2002).

With his company of eleven performers and two stage managers, Grimes created a prototype season. All of the influences instrumental in the forging of modern Newfoundland theatre were to be included: a collective creation, a dinner theatre piece (*Ethie*), a variety night in the community-concert mold entitled *Neddy Norris Night* (after the name of the first recorded settler in the area), and a new play.

Grimes headed to the Centre For Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University to acquire recitations and music for *Neddy Norris*. When *Neddy Norris Night* opened with Grimes in the title role, it quickly became the signature creation of the festival. Coates revised his playscript for *Ethie* and, to their mutual surprise, the play became a huge hit. The local committees were utilized to find research contacts and accommodation for the company. Meanwhile, the cast, none of whom was older than 29, worked under Grimes's direction to create the collective *From Toxic Rock It Grows*. A regional playwright, Bob Pierce, was brought in to assist with the writing. As with the presence of mainland playwright Rick Salutin with the Mummies for *IWA* (Brookes 147-148), this created complications, as a solid nucleus was now disturbed by an outside entity. However, Grimes viewed Pierce's work as a valuable dramaturgical contribution, as the playwright observed patterns and created metaphors from outside the cauldron of the working process. The dialectical tension between historical fact and dramatic revision became an issue with the younger, idealistic actors, who were often reluctant to alter the first in order to achieve the second. This intense creative process was the foundation for the success of *Neddy Norris Night* as well. By this time the actors knew each other well and their improvisational skills were sharp from hours of use each day.

The final production of 1996 was not as successful. Grimes had perhaps unknowingly altered the working chemistry of the company in his desire to invite a director other than himself to direct a new play. *The Pasta King Of The Caribbean* was produced in Rocky Harbour to abysmally small houses. Directed by an inexperienced company member, and with Grimes's attention focused

on his own work in a town some 43 kilometres away, the actors' confidence suffered and the production foundered. A perception amongst the company that Rocky Harbour was not as welcoming an environment as Cow Head took root, with implications for the future of the festival. Rocky Harbour would be left to its natural attractions, and Cow Head, spearheaded by local booster Darel House, would assume pride of place in TNL's summer operations.

At this point, with a successful first season accomplished, the TNL board of directors had begun to entertain the idea of a permanent home for the festival. The impression that Rocky Harbour, in Grimes's words, was too "PEI'ised" (a reference to the popular perception of neighbouring Prince Edward Island as placid and complacent) to actively promote a new festival led to the conscious decision to focus on Cow Head and to collaborate with Darel House in establishing the festival there. At this stage, Grimes had succeeded in enacting his personal vision of the festival. Though less political in orientation than the work of Brookes or Boal, the emerging festival had begun to distinguish itself with its celebration of local and regional culture and its use of emerging young artists from the area. According to Grimes, "It wasn't about making a dollar; it was about stealing a page from the park. They [park administrators] were about preserving wildlife. *Neddy Norris* is about preserving culture."

Cow Head is 30 kilometres north of Sally's Cove, where the Mummies staged their stand against the park. As Grimes departed TNL for mainland pursuits prior to the 1997 season, and the GMTF steadily increased its impact in the region, the irony was not lost on Grimes that the park was now serving as a home for theatre activity which complemented, rather than countered, its mandate. An exception to this was Stephen Drover's production of a collective play entitled *Layers In The Rock* in 1998, which tied together the history of the park with the people whose lives it changed forever—those residents forced to leave when the boundaries of the park were drawn and the enclaves enumerated.

In establishing a home for the festival Grimes the idealist and House the capitalist had found common ground. It was all, says Grimes, "about having a stake in it." House actively promoted the festival. In renovating the dry goods store donated by House and outfitting it, through ACOA funding, as a fully functioning theatre, TNL was signalling to the community that the festival was there to stay. Cow Head residents quickly embraced the festival, providing housing, goods, services, and hospitality to the ragtag band of young artists. On the one hand the artists managed to cope with

issues such as a lack of fresh produce, while on the other the citizenry coped with an exuberant pack of urban youth enthusiastically rediscovering their Newfoundland roots.

A subsequent part of Grimes's plan had been for *Neddy* to travel, and an old van had been purchased for the purpose. The cast of *Neddy* was constantly changed to avoid a "star system" and to provide the casting flexibility needed to tour the show while *Ethie* played in Cow Head. House, however, chafed when *Neddy* was somewhere else on the coast and his bar was quiet. The board of directors worried quietly about the costs of travelling, especially as they pondered a commitment to large-scale renovation of the building donated by Darel House in Cow Head (Drover). Having taken the extraordinary risk of establishing a festival more than two hours' drive from their home community, the board's caution was understandable.<sup>10</sup> However, a van was eventually purchased and the touring aspect of the GMTF gradually became an integral part of its season (Buckle, 11 September 2002).<sup>11</sup>

"You dance with the one that brung ya," Grimes notes in describing the decision to commit full-time to a base of operations in Cow Head. The festival's visits to such communities as Parson's Pond, Daniel's Harbour, Norris Point, and Port au Choix were instrumental to its success when this writer became the GMTF's first Artistic Director,<sup>12</sup> not only in promoting the festival but in fostering a sense of ownership in the regional population and a perception that the GMTF was a guardian of local cultural tradition. Travelling with *Neddy Norris* and other shows would continue for three years after Grime's departure, but the seat of power had been firmly identified as being the House of House.

By the end of its second season the GMTF had attracted a total audience of 1377 people to its four shows (TNL). *From Toxic Rock It Grows* had been performed outside in a natural amphitheatre near the oldest part of the town known as "the Head." *Ethie* and *Neddy Norris Night* occupied the dining room and bar of the Shallow Bay Motel, and *Pasta King* had played in a motel in Rocky Harbour. At this point the warehouse, a small squat building, met fire code regulations and House suggested it as an alternative for productions not suitable for the motel, rather than the site used in Rocky Harbour. The TNL board began actively to apply for funding to renovate the building.

In early 1997 Jerry Etienne announced his resignation from TNL. The board, flush with the enthusiasm gained from a successful first full year with the GMTF, was now faced with an unstable situation. Fall and winter programming in Corner Brook was

costly, and audiences had steadily diminished at the cavernous Arts and Culture Centre. On the other hand, the cost of establishing the festival, while not minimal, had been offset significantly by support from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, and audiences were not only increasing, but coming from across the province and from other parts of Canada. The situation of a dual season supported by single season funding was to continue under this writer's tenure as Artistic Director of both TNL and the GMTF from 1997 to 1999. Upon the hiring of Jeff Pitcher as TNL's Artistic Director in late 1999, the GMTF became the programming series with which TNL identifies itself to its sponsors and funding agencies.

Grimes, meanwhile, had decided to pursue his career outside the province. His vision for the company, though still evident, was becoming subordinate to the priorities of TNL and its board of directors. Popular enfranchisement and cultural experiments are easier to manage on a small scale, but with the increasing success of the festival came increased fiscal responsibility and the need for a "stable" product. Grimes is pragmatic with regard to the GMTF's direction: "All the actors coming out of the theatre school should be able to stay in Newfoundland. That part still works. The unknowable, the collective—why lose it just because it's a risk or it doesn't make money? But my vision couldn't be sustained—once you do it, you move on."

Grimes is probably overly pessimistic in his assessment. The GMTF continues in many ways to live up to the objectives he had in mind at its inception. The commitment to interaction with the community remains integral to its success. Collectives continue to be produced periodically. The theatre spaces have become more conventional and the touring has diminished, but the festival's influence on Newfoundland theatre has only grown. It has achieved this while remaining popular within its community and region, something Grimes had always envisaged.

With the departure in 1997 of the festival's driving force and TNL's Artistic Director, the GMTF faced new challenges. A mainland director took hold of the artistic reins, and the renovation of Darel House's old warehouse building resulted in the GMTF's attractive, 90 seat theatre. The number of shows produced increased, along with the number of people employed by the festival. The increase in audience since 1996 has been exponential. From its initial 128 patrons in 1995, the GMTF reached, in the 2002 season, a total attendance of 9100 people (TNL).

Fittingly, the Artistic Director of the GMTF from 2000 to the



present is another artist with a stake in the legacy of the Mummers Troupe. Jeff Pitcher, former Stephenville theatre student, Mummer, and performer with Rising Tide, has stewarded the organization through a remarkable period of artistic and financial growth. In 2002 houses were 100% full and, more remarkably, over 3200 people were turned away (Buckle, 11 September 2002). Plans are afoot for the development of a second theatre space in Cow Head (Pitcher, 9 November 2002). Pitcher's extensive theatre background all over the island uniquely qualifies him as a spokesman for TNL and the GMTF in terms of funding and arranging reciprocal artistic and production deals with other Newfoundland companies. He has continued and expanded the commitment of the festival to new plays and regional artists, and the GMTF is now active in the workshopping and development of Newfoundland material. This too accords with Grime's vision of the festival as a developmental facility for artists and community alike. As well, the artistic leadership of TNL has recognized the need for the festival to retain its local appeal and not outgrow its surroundings (Drover). Mistakes made at festivals such as the ATF, where fiscal over-reach and an outdated mandate unrelated to the community resulted in massive debts, seem unlikely to occur in Cow Head.

Newfoundlanders are increasingly confident in their culture and in representing it to the global community. When this writer arrived at the Shallow Bay Motel in 1997, the presence of Newfie joke books, plastic lobsters, and other stereotypical paraphernalia was a distressing sight. Neither Varrick Grimes nor myself were interested in perpetuating the "Newfie" stereotype in the work of the festival. Today, however, as playwright and current TNL Artistic Director Jeff Pitcher notes, the "rubber boot issue" has been put to rest (Pitcher, 9 November, 2002). By this Pitcher means not that the stereotype has disappeared: his series of plays based on the characters of "Ed and Ed," featured annually at the GMTF, play to the stereotype and have proven to be popular with audiences. Perhaps they have not been put to rest so much as taken over by the former victims of this stereotyping. The unapologetic stance and confident skill with which various elements of Newfoundland history are put into play at the festival discourages any lingering uncritical association of such stereotypes with the population of the region.

The production of *Tempting Providence* by Robert Chafe, which was commissioned by TNL in 2003 and directed by Jillian Keiley, provides another example. The play is an adept amalgam of

effective, lyrical theatricality and Newfoundlanders' view of themselves as a hardy lot where outsiders, such as Myra Bennett, can come and make a new life for themselves. As a result of successes such as Grimes's creation of *Neddy Norris Night*, this writer's production of Michael Cook's *The Fisherman's Revenge* (1998, 1999), and Keiley's production of *Tempting Providence*, the GMTF is now established as the second largest festival in the province, and is a major contributor in the revival of the west coast economy and culture. In a few short years, the vision of Varrick Grimes and the hard work and dedication of TNL and its supporters has borne fruit on rocky soil.

The development and rapid evolution of the Gros Morne Theatre Festival is an apt metaphor for the rapid growth in professional theatrical activity in the region as a whole since 1992. With a clear and often conscious nod to the old traditions of mummering and the community concert, theatre artists have created a thoroughly modern theatre culture which reflects contemporary approaches without losing the distinctiveness which marks theatrical performance in Newfoundland. The burgeoning Summer in the Bight Festival in Trinity Bay has been joined by the Gros Morne Theatre Festival as hotbeds of local theatrical creation and activity. Other festivals have sprouted along the coastline of the province over the past ten years, but none has achieved the national and international success of the GMTF.

In St. John's a theatre community has developed which can fuse disparate theatrical influences into distinctive expressions of local culture. Collective creation continues in various independent productions; in December 2005 a collective entitled *No Mummies Allowed In!* was directed by Andy Jones at the LSPU Hall. The title and subject of the piece, a playful murder mystery utilizing various well-known elements of the mummering tradition, testifies to the importance of Newfoundland's cultural past as artists go about creating its future. Notably, the play also featured four performers who together create anarchic sketch comedy as the Dance Party of Newfoundland. Sara Tilley, a Pochinko-trained clown who has started her own theatre company in St. John's, was also in the cast. Within this production, directed by one of the most respected members of what is now Newfoundland theatre's "old guard," one could find elements of the collective creation, community concert, and mummering traditions, with outside modern influences such as clown thrown in for good measure.

In the 1970s the Mummies began to bring the outports and

the capital city together, in rediscovering old practices and creating theatre in towns outside St. John's. CODCO brought Newfoundland to the world and returned, its experienced members bearing gifts. Rising Tide validated the indigenous-oriented festival model. The Gros Morne Theatre Festival, in borrowing successfully from all of these progenitors, has established itself as a distinctive voice of Newfoundland culture. ❁

## NOTES

- 1 In writing this article, interviews were conducted with individuals who were primary figures in the first efforts to establish a theatre festival in Gros Morne National Park and with those who took primary roles in establishing and maintaining the festival. In addition, conversations of a more casual nature took place during my tenure as Artistic Director at TNL with various members of the board of directors involved in starting up the project; with Darel House, the motel owner who became an instrumental part of the festival's early success; and with artists and residents in Cow Head. In all cases every effort has been made to corroborate opinions and confirm the details of events.
- 2 The "six mile" rule was promulgated in 1637. Although it was suspended in 1677, liberalization of the settlement laws were resisted by the fish merchants and new restrictions were added regularly. In 1671 laws were added explicitly forbidding the keeping-up of gardens. Furthermore, O'Flaherty notes settlers were not to "erect or make any houses, buildings, gardens, etc." or "fell, cut down, root up, waste, burn, or destroy any wood, or timber trees" (O'Flaherty, 40-1). This would seem categorical.
- 3 As commentators have noted, the term "indigenous" is problematic with regard to Newfoundland history, given the presence of at least three aboriginal peoples before the European colonizations in the eleventh and seventeenth centuries. James Tuck points out that both mainland Labrador and the island of Newfoundland were covered by glaciers until about 13,000 years ago (11). Groups such as the Maritime Archaic Indians, Recent Indians, and Thule Inuit arrived after substantial migrations. They can therefore claim to be First Nations but not truly indigenous. Given that the word is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary as "originating or occurring naturally in a particular place" I believe the word describes both those first nations peoples born subsequent to the migration of their people to the area of Newfoundland and Labrador and those, such as the European settlers, who came after and stayed to produce new generations.
- 4 As detailed in the social anthropology data collected by the contributors to *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (See Halpert & Story), outport residents do not knock on each other's doors when visiting.

This practise may well have changed in recent years but the drama of Newfoundland is rife with references to the strangeness of a knock on the door.

- 5 Soper says the first production took place in 1938 (12), but the organization's initial meeting took place October 2, 1937 (17). It is fascinating to read in Soper's account the view that the St. John's Players were a group devoted to experimentation; this may be true given the arid context of the contemporary drama scene in St. John's in 1937. Soper draws links with the Players and the "little theatre" movement associated with Antoine and Brahm in France and Germany—pretty heady company; but Antoine's performers, after all, were all amateurs as well, and untrained amateurs at that.
- 6 Particularly in *A Public Nuisance* by Chris Brookes (see Works Cited).
- 7 All future quotations from Varrick Grimes are taken from the 2002 interview (see Works Cited).
- 8 See Peters, *The Plays Of CODCO*.
- 9 See Peters, *Stars In The Sky Morning* and Lynde.
- 10 Similar sentiments from various board members were made known to me during my first year as Artistic Director of the GMTF, in 1997.
- 11 Under Jeff Pitcher, the TNL / GMTF's current Artistic Director, the emphasis has shifted from touring locally to an increasingly successful national and international profile.
- 12 This writer assumed the dual roles of Artistic Director of TNL and of the GMTF in April 1997, continuing until August, 1999. Grimes remained an Artistic Associate at TNL while he did the work necessary to create the Gros Morne Theatre Festival.

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