

COMPTEs RENDUS / BOOK REVIEWS

BRUCE BARTON, ed.

Marigraph: Gauging the Tides of Drama from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2004. 423pp.

JOSH WEALE

Attending the 2004 Shifting Tides conference in Toronto where this anthology was officially launched by conference organizer and editor Bruce Barton, I was given the chance to read with Melissa Mullen from her play *Rough Waters*. Unfortunately, Mullen's subtle and soulful story of a family coming to terms with a changing way of life in the fisheries was scheduled to follow a reading by Charlie Rhindress from his domestic farce *The Maritime Way of Life*. Charlie had the audience in the palm of his hand as he read excerpts that described a father who continues to go to work everyday in a closed mine (even after having a lung removed) and his son Donnie who tries to "refurnish" the cod stocks by growing some in a backyard pond. Understandably our reading felt agonizingly earnest in relation. But the positioning of the readings did provide an illuminating illustration of the complex engagement with tradition that Barton was forced to wrestle into this anthology of Maritime drama.

In his introduction to *Marigraph* Barton draws our attention to the way in which Maritime culture has become synonymous with a simple way of life "long lost to the rest of contemporary society." Indeed, throughout this anthology there is a vein of nostalgia for a traditional mode of living that is falling victim to the machinations of modern progress. In *The Glace Bay Miners' Museum* Neil Curry is a guardian of traditional music and stories that are being lost in the darkness of the pit; trawlers threaten the traditional fisheries in *Rough Waters*; bulldozers threaten to destroy an agrarian way of life in Kent Stetson's *Horse High, Bull Strong, Pig Tight*; garbage trucks are used to haul Canada's oldest African community into new public housing in George Boyd's *Consecrated Ground*. The images may be uniquely Maritime, but the thematic clash of "tradition" and "progress" is, of course, universal.

But the dramatic engagement with values of tradition takes on a distinctly Maritime quality when it addresses the way in which

tradition has been fetishized within Maritime culture (with the help of tourism marketing) to the point where it has become a defining stereotype. In his introduction, Barton speaks to the way in which the region's traditional way of life can be seen as a sort of cultural performance played for an "outside (and paying) eye." He adds:

For stereotype to offer more than a site for economic opportunism requires that it be more than merely enacted. Rather, it is when stereotype is scrutinized, dismantled and reconfigured, mobilized, and, even, enjoyed, in a self-referential and empowering way, that it offers the potential for agency, identity and understanding. (iv)

One of the strengths of Barton's introduction is the way in which he focuses our attention on this complex engagement with cultural stereotype. Throughout the works in this anthology stereotype is mobilized as a shorthand expression of the dramatic conflict between tradition and modernity. For instance, when Bryden MacDonald's displaced Caper in *Divinity Bash* expresses a longing for the ocean, the audience's expectations of the Maritime way of life, with traditional, tightly knit communities, confronts the play's presentation of urban isolation. Similarly, in works such as Daniel MacIvor's *Marion Bridge* and Norm Foster's *Ethan Claymore*, outsiders or "from awayers" carry their own readily understood stereotypes and prejudices that are both challenged and exploited. However, no work in this anthology takes as much pleasure playing with our fetish for tradition as Charlie Rhindress's unabashedly self-referential *Maritime Way of Life*. Barton, by drawing heavily from Rhindress's work in his introduction and by giving it the opening slot in the anthology, wisely uses this work as a prism through which the rest of the anthology can be understood.

While *Marigraph's* examination of our cultural relation to tradition does capture an important theme in Maritime drama, it should be noted that this is not an anthology built primarily around thematic concerns. It serves a much more immediate and concrete purpose. In his article "Too Distant Voices: The Publishing of Dramatic Texts in the Maritimes" written for the *Canadian Theatre Review* 98 (Summer 1999), Barton noted that writing about the publishing of Maritime drama is a little like "composing a treatise on woodsprites" and suggested that the lack of publishing opportunities served as an obstacle to production

opportunities and critical esteem. This substantial publication presents a diverse and representative collection of active Maritime playwrights who lend considerable weight to the ephemeral idea of a Maritime drama.

By assembling an eclectic collection of work that includes such heavyweights as Daniel MacIvor, Kent Stetson, George Boyd, Wendy Lill, and Norm Foster, *Marigraph* puts Maritime drama's best foot forward in an anthology that should serve to pique the interest of theatre practitioners and theorists alike. But what is even more impressive is the way that this anthology highlights the engagement of our big writers with big ideas of tradition and progress. Barton, through his own rigorous engagement with the texts (and by highlighting their engagement with Maritime culture) has made dramatic contribution to what ought to be an ongoing conversation on the evolving role of tradition in Maritime culture.



ANNE-MARIE CLOUTIER

Le dépit amoureux. Créateurs et critiques

Montréal, Fides, 2005, 235p.

CATHERINE CYR

Collaboratrice de longue date du quotidien *La Presse* où elle signe de nombreuses critiques théâtrales et dresse quelques portraits d'artistes, Anne-Marie Cloutier aborde, dans cet ouvrage, la question des rapports — souvent délicats, tendus — qui se tissent, au Québec, entre la critique et les créateurs en théâtre. Partant des interrogations intimes qui, au fil des ans, ont jalonné son parcours journalistique, l'auteure se penche sur certaines des questions qui, à vrai dire, sous-tendent la crise de légitimité de toute critique artistique, laquelle, depuis ses premiers développements au XVIIIe siècle, a connu plusieurs bouleversements mais ne s'est jamais trouvée tout à fait résolue. Faisant l'économie d'une mise en contexte du phénomène, et ne laissant transparaître que bien peu de pistes de réflexion et d'efforts d'analyse, l'auteure a plutôt choisi de mettre au jour, sans trop les décortiquer, certaines des composantes qui fondent la crise actuelle. Aussi, en abordant les formes et fonctions de la critique théâtrale québécoise, en questionnant son impact, son rôle et sa place dans le champ culturel, l'ouvrage