

# INTRODUCTION

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**T**HIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *BC Studies* comes at an auspicious time for the theatrical culture of British Columbia, which has probably never been healthier nor more vibrant. During 2002-03, a number of key institutions achieved milestone anniversaries. UBC's Frederic Wood Theatre celebrated its 50th year, the Playhouse Theatre Company completed its 40th season, and both Playwrights Theatre Centre and the Vancouver East Cultural Centre marked thirty years of dynamic production and new play development. Vancouver's spectacularly successful Shakespeare festival, Bard on the Beach, expanded to the Okanagan with a season in Kelowna. And the Arts Club – one of the most extraordinary success stories in all of Canadian theatre – announced its 40th season, which will include plays by BC icons Nicola Cavendish and Morris Panych. Panych's *Auntie and Me* (originally produced at the Arts Club as *Vigil*) enjoyed the international prestige of a long run in London's West End alongside another BC play, the collectively created *Mom's the Word* (retitled *Mum's the Word* in London). Nationally, British Columbian playwrights also continued to excel. The 2002 Governor General's Award for Drama was won by Kevin Kerr for his play *Unity (1918)*, with fellow Vancouverite Lorena Gale a runner-up for *Je me souviens*, and Marie Clements' *Burning Vision* was honoured in 2003 with invitations to major festivals in Ottawa and Montreal.

The longevity and heightened profile of BC theatre – not just in Vancouver, but in Kamloops and Chilliwack, Victoria and Prince George, Armstrong and Enderby – has also begun attracting the interest of academics. This special issue grows directly out of the second conference on BC theatre, *Staging the Pacific Province 2*, held at UBC in October 2001, following the success of the first such conference at UCC Kamloops in May 1999. With thirty academic papers as well as panels, playwrights'

readings and special presentations, these two gatherings probably focused more critical attention on BC theatre than any previous events. As James Hoffman details in his overview of BC theatre history and criticism in this volume, serious academic treatment of the province's theatrical life has been sporadic and uneven. Despite the work of scholars like Michael Booth, Chad Evans, Malcolm Page and Hoffman himself, large gaps remain in the historical record, including whole areas of First Nations performance, and the field generally is seriously under-theorized.

This volume marks a small step towards remedying the situation. James Hoffman's article represents the first attempt to theorize BC theatre historiography, to question how BC theatre has been understood (and misunderstood), defined, and reinscribed in the critical literature. Jean Barman and Patrick O'Neill reintroduce two of the province's early 20th century theatrical pioneers, Constance Lindsay Skinner and Carroll Aikins. Barman recounts how Skinner, possibly BC's first professional playwright, received major American productions of her BC frontier play *The Birthright* before the infrastructure of professional theatre was ever available in her home province. (In fact the play finally had its Canadian premiere in Vancouver in May 2003.) O'Neill concentrates on Aikins's innovative use of the New Stagecraft during his playwriting career in BC before he established the short-lived but prestigious Home Theatre in a Naramata apple orchard in 1920. Aikins, too, had his plays staged elsewhere – in Toronto and Birmingham, England – at a time when theatre was hardly a significant provincial export. George Belliveau looks at the metatheatrical treatment of BC history by two contemporary playwrights, Sharon Pollock and Joan MacLeod, in works that have been successfully staged in British Columbia and across Canada. And Sherrill Grace discusses a theatrical meeting, across time and space, of two major BC artists in Joy Coghill's auto/biographical stage treatment of Emily Carr.

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