SHEDDING THE COLONIAL PAST:
Rethinking British Columbia Theatre

JAMES HOFFMAN

THEATRICAL BRITISH COLUMBIA? Surely for theatre we need look only at the province itself, at the spectacle of its "super/natural" scenery, the plotlines of its melodramatic history, and, especially, the saints and shysters of its wily dramatis personae: Amor de Cosmos, Phil Gaglardi, Ma Murray, Bill Vander Zalm, the McLean Brothers. For many people, British Columbia *is* theatre, *Maclean's* magazine (June 1973) calling it "the Latin America of Canada ... a rain forest with mythical beasts ... [where] things grow tall and tropical; occasional cougars roam the suburbs." Political scientist Terry Morley (1990, 19) believes that "politics in British Columbia is theatre and the legislative buildings furnish the locale for the main stage." This stagiest of provinces, however, has been notably absent from its own stages: with the possible exception of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, most people probably could not name a British Columbia play, much less a theatre company, an actor, or a director. How many would know, for example, that all the characters named above have been the subject of a professional stage play?[1]

In short, we know that we have a theatrical history but not that we have a historical theatre. Sometimes even the people recording it find only absence: Peter Haworth, writing in 1962, begins his ironically entitled article, "Theatre in Vancouver," with the statement: "There is no permanent professional theatre in Vancouver, and some of our

[1] *Amor de Cosmos*, by Joe Wiesenfeld, unpublished, staged by Dionysus Theatre Company, Dawson Creek, 1978; *Flyin' Phil*, by Ian Weir, unpublished, Western Canada Theatre Company, Kamloops, 1991; *Ma!* by Eric Nicol, unpublished, the New Play Centre, Vancouver, and Western Canada Theatre Company, Kamloops, 1981; *Escape from Fantasy Gardens*, by Mark Leiren-Young (Toronto: Playwrights Union of Canada), Firehall Theatre, Vancouver, 1987; *The McLean Boys*, by Ian Weir, unpublished, Western Canada Theatre Company, Kamloops, 1996.

Joy Coghill, centre, beginning her provincial tour in the lead role in *Ma!*, meets the real Ma Murray, left, at opening night in Kamloops, 27 April 1981. Directly behind Joy is playwright Eric Nicol. Photo courtesy of Western Canada Theatre, Kamloops.

more pessimistic critics would have us believe that there never will be" (18). The development of locally generated plays, something pursued with great energy and many triumphs at Vancouver's New Play Centre (an institution that has successfully nurtured many BC playwrights since the early 1970s), is barely noticed. The centre managed, according to critic Jerry Wasserman (1990, 7), "to get through its first two decades without having been the subject of even a single article in a national publication."[2] When writers *do* find a theatre to talk about, they promptly discover beginnings and then, just as quickly, endings. Michael Booth (1961a, 167), in "The Beginnings of Theatre in British Columbia," provides a list of short-lived moments of theatrical glory, first with amateurs in the late 1850s, then with touring professionals, each brave start followed inevitably by decline, sometimes wholesale: "in 1882 there was no regular theatre open in the province."

Many efforts to describe what we might provisionally call a British Columbia "theatre" have consisted, until recently, of well-plotted, well-documented works that attempt to make narratological sense out

[2] In fact, there is one article – Christina Marlow's (1979) "Vancouver's Vibrant New Play Centre" – published in Ontario. I am grateful to Jerry Wasserman for pointing this out to me and to Jeniva Berger, the editor, for sending me the article.

of a dizzying array of performance modalities. However, viewed from the perspectives of the postcolonial present, the narratives written have also been narratives hidden. This is because so much of the recording and the criticism of our theatrical history is remarkably partial (in the sense of being both fragmented in time and space and limited in its politics). The writers, overall, demonstrate a highly selective memory, an inclination to mystify great moments, and, almost always, a fierce avoidance of summary or theoretical discussion.

Why is this? For one thing, it is a rowdy scene out there, and the reader might well get the impression that the historians of British Columbia's theatre have agreed to stick to tidy, unassuming versions of brief theatrical radiance, to isolated displays of theatrical fireworks that are spectacular, local, contained – and scarcely meaningful. What can be done, they seem to be saying, with that bewildering hodgepodge of naval on-boards, rickety opera houses, mining-camp variety, racist minstrel shows, fading British stars on tour, American burlesque, fly-by-night magicians, ballyhooed boxing contests, maybe a Salish or Haida dance – all those things that constitute our theatrical inheritance? Other than, of course, enthusiastic reportage? As a result, there has been obsessive attention to firsts, to biggests, and to bests, along with the caveat that theatre in British Columbia either is not very different from other places (i.e., that it has always reflected regional or national cultural networks) or, contrarily, that it *is* different, that "British Columbia theatre is its own world," as one theatre critic expressed it (Page 1984, 5; 1985, 167), although we are not exactly sure what that world is.

Not that we are alone in this. Comprehensive theatre histories are rare in Canada; the ones we have thus far are largely developmental chronicles of heroic amateur struggle ending in professional triumph, closely replicating the patterns of colonial invasion and settlement. "The early history of prairie theatre is a story of hardship and endurance. Pioneer performers faced long, arduous journeys ... Yet theatre took root and flourished in the West." So begins Ross Stuart's *The History of Prairie Theatre* (1984, 17). Another history, *Early Stages: Theatre in Ontario, 1800-1914,* is premised on the following overarching narrative: "'A small company of courageous, even foolhardy itinerant entertainers' grew in number and competence, 'reaching finally the Golden Age of melodrama . . . .' By 1914, theatre . . . was an accepted and prosperous part of Ontario culture" (Saddlemyer 1990, vii). Justification for the latter validates Ontario as "a distinct

region within Canada" (vi); justification for the former validates the idea that, on the Prairies, the emergence of theatre was concomitant with the arrival of civilization.

All of which reminds us how clearly Canada's performance history is inflected with the experience of colonialism – the very name "British Columbia" being a binarism of the imperial legacy. Indeed, the tasks of locating and discussing local theatre practices, debating which forms are authentic, acknowledging the role of policing and authorizing under various regimes, and, most important, uncovering crucial efforts to decolonize aspects of performance are all deeply problematized in a province that so many have found so difficult to characterize. Jean Barman (1991), for example, devotes the final chapter of her history of the province to portraying that elusive construction, "The British Columbia Identity."

Even the understanding of theatre itself has been restrictive. With its etymological sources in the structures of ancient Greek theatre (*theatron* = "seeing place"), the word "theatre" has evoked and naturalized the values and practices of European performance styles, especially during the past few centuries with the dominance of the proscenium stage, which has its own colonizing binaries. A proscenium theatre separates the audience from the performance (usually in fixed seating), typically takes place in unlit rooms (the viewers literally and figuratively in the dark), and forces the members of the audience to concentrate their attention in a single direction, while the performers alone occupy the (lighted) stage and maintain full control of movement, sound, and story. Positioning the audience members as passive receptors and the performers as sole active providers imitates the colonized/colonizer relationship. Lately, according to various postcolonial perspectives, the word "theatre" has been understood to embrace wide performance styles, such as those of ceremony, ritual, popular performance, and paratheatre – all of which tend to have flexible performance structures that are well rooted in the local community.

Where to begin? Clearly we must look at some segment of time and at some type of performance. Of course, by creating periodizations and subcategories, we risk reinstalling the very Euro-colonial tropes of exploration (hardship stories of early touring companies), discovery (naming first theatre groups, first shows), and conquest (building theatres, staging successful shows) that have thus far dominated theatre history and criticism in the province. The most important

lesson we can learn from reading the writers of British Columbia's theatre history is that this writing needs more inclusive, more discursive categories of content and analysis – ones that open the discussion to the unique imagery and memory that constitute what we might more accurately call the performance culture of the province.

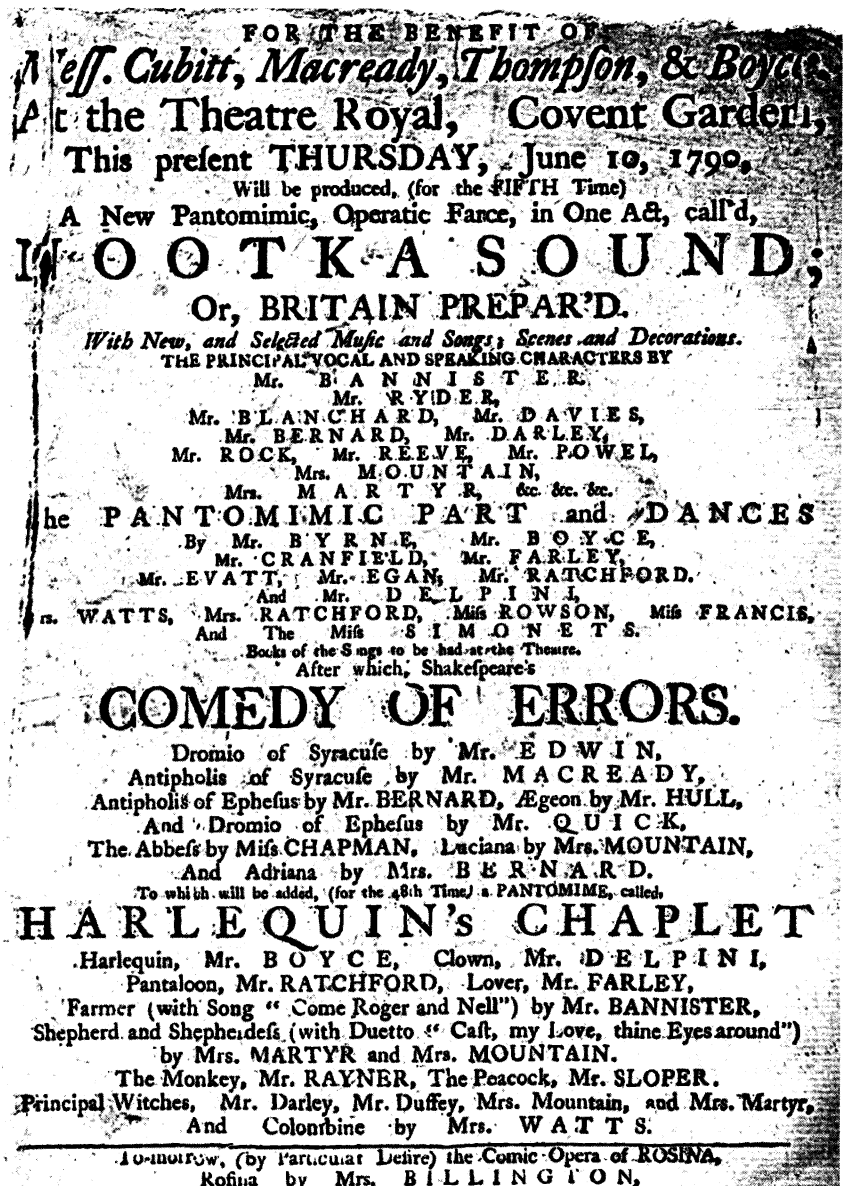
This includes finding and referencing the most salient aspects of contemporary theory – especially postcolonial theory, which seems so pertinent to our long colonial heritage. At this time, however, the writing of British Columbia theatre utilizes little theory and therefore leaves its subject highly uncertain. We need (and I count myself in this) to include all public activities in which communities of people enact purposeful ceremonies of cultural, economic, and/or political transaction. We need to examine, for example, the ritual significance of the rare twin stone masks (Duff 1975, 164) found in northwest British Columbia (one is now in Ottawa, the other in Paris) in the late nineteenth century just as much as we need to examine the social effects of that "first" farcical play presented on HMS *Trincomalee* in Esquimalt Harbour in 1853 (Evans 1983, 14) or the significance of the three-year run of Sherman Snukal's *Talking Dirty* in Vancouver in the early 1980s. We need to understand British Columbians as "provincial" players (with an internal polyphony of voices) by studying our greatest stage – the legislative buildings in Victoria – and we need to discuss the role of British Columbians (as extraprovincial players) in two of our greatest shows ever, Expo 86 in Vancouver and the 1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria. We need to examine the presence of the province on the world stage, especially through the role and contribution of First Nations peoples. As Douglas Cole (1989, 76) confirms, it is they who "have been the most significant local contributors to the world's culture."

In effect, the writers of BC theatre history need to look much more at the intercultural activities that profoundly, permanently mark our performance culture. They need to begin with the period of early contact, when there was a repertoire of enactments on floating, moving stages, on sailing ships and canoes, and when there were open spaces in villages or near trading posts where European and Aboriginal traders performed in the presence of each other and established performance traditions – traditions that we have scarcely examined but that continue to haunt our performance criticism. This archive is our most silent; yet I believe it contains the fundamental performance transactions – social, ritual, aesthetic – that undergird

a broadly understood British Columbia theatre. Neglect in the critical literature stems in part from almost exclusive analysis of the written word, typically found in playscripts, newspaper reviews, articles, annals, guides, biographies – all institutionally sanctioned, all displaying thematic stability and authorial privilege. The act of theatre, however, what goes on "up there," is evanescent, richly coded, a "mixed bag affair" (Benson 1987, 26); in other words, it is largely non-textual. Missing are informed descriptions of the materiality of theatre, of movement, costumes, settings, vocal tones, reactions of spectators; that is, a reconfiguring of our analysis of theatre that would allow for a greater variety of meanings. We learn, for example, that Charles Kean performed in Victoria in the early 1860s and that his visit "became a political football" (Hughes 1988, 33) because of his prestige as a star of the British stage. What we don't learn are the cultural/political values he instilled through his selection of plays and the ways in which he calibrated them in performance for this unique audience.

If we group our entire theatre by time, it must divide roughly into the precolonial, the colonial, and the postcolonial periods; if there is a meta-narrative, it is the non-ending story of arrival and display, of immigrant and Aboriginal cultures contending for ceremonial space on constantly shifting stages. One attempt to address this is my investigation of what I am calling British Columbia's first play (Hoffman 2000). This was a staging of *Nootka Sound; Or, Britain Prepar'd*[3] in London in 1790 at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. This jingoistic musical production depicted events that had recently taken place at Nootka Sound on the west coast of what we now call Vancouver Island as well as activities that were taking place in the present as Britain readied itself for war with Spain (over trading rights in the Pacific Northwest). On the stage, in June of that year, London audiences watched and cheered as stout English tars contended with shifty Spanish sailors, while, nearby, First Nations people, their habitat spectacularly depicted in "new and selected ... scenes and decorations" (according to a poster advertising the show) observed and reacted, triply embodied as audience, performer, and setting. What I notice about this formal stage performance at one of London's major theatres is the deep ambivalence of Britain's colonizing venture in the Pacific Northwest, even in the heart of Empire, evidenced in the generically dispersed nature of the production.

[3] The original holograph playscript is held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.



FOR THE BENEFIT OF

Meſſ. Cubitt, Macready, Thompſon, & Boyce.

At the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden,

This preſent THURSDAY, June 10, 1790,

Will be produced, (for the FIFTH Time)

A New Pantomimic, Operatic Farce, in One Act, call'd,

NOOTKA SOUND;

Or, BRITAIN PREPAR'D.

With New, and Selected Muſic and Songs; Scenes and Decorations.

THE PRINCIPAL VOCAL AND SPEAKING CHARACTERS BY

Mr. BANNISTER,
Mr. RYDER,
Mr. BLANCHARD, Mr. DAVIES,
Mr. BERNARD, Mr. DARLEY,
Mr. ROCK, Mr. REEVE, Mr. POWEL,
Mrs. MOUNTAIN,
Mrs. MARTYR, &c. &c. &c.

The PANTOMIMIC PART and DANCES

By Mr. BYRNE, Mr. BOYCE,
Mr. CRANFIELD, Mr. FARLEY,
Mr. EVATT, Mr. EGAN, Mr. RATCHFORD.
And Mr. DELPINI,

Mrs. WATTS, Mrs. RATCHFORD, Miſs ROWSON, Miſs FRANCIS,
And The Miſs SIMONETS.

Books of the Songs to be had at the Theatre.

After which, Shakeſpeare's

COMEDY OF ERRORS.

Dromio of Syracuſe by Mr. EDWIN,
Antipholis of Syracuſe by Mr. MACREADY,
Antipholis of Epheſus by Mr. BERNARD, Ægeon by Mr. HULL,
And Dromio of Epheſus by Mr. QUICK,
The Abbeſs by Miſs CHAPMAN, Luciana by Mrs. MOUNTAIN,
And Adriana by Mrs. BERNARD.

To which will be added, (for the 48th Time) a PANTOMIME, called,

HARLEQUIN's CHAPLET

Harlequin, Mr. BOYCE, Clown, Mr. DELPINI,
Pantaloon, Mr. RATCHFORD, Lover, Mr. FARLEY,
Farmer (with Song "Come Roger and Nell") by Mr. BANNISTER,
Shepherd and Shepherdeſs (with Duetto "Caſt, my Love, thine Eyes around")
by Mrs. MARTYR and Mrs. MOUNTAIN.
The Monkey, Mr. RAYNER, The Peacock, Mr. SLOPER.
Principal Witches, Mr. Darley, Mr. Duffey, Mrs. Mountain, and Mrs. Martyr,
And Colombine by Mrs. WATTS.

To-morrow, (by Particular Deſire) the Comic Opera of ROSINA,
Roſina by Mrs. BILLINGTON,
The Comedy of ANIMAL MAGNETISM,
And the Muſical Farce of The FARMER.

The jingoistic *Nootka Sound; Or, Britain Prepar'd* opened at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, on the King's Birthday, 4 June 1790, and ran for six performances. Revised and renamed, it played later the same year, then in short runs during 1791, 1793, 1794, 1795, and 1796. This "Pantomimic, Operatic Farce" attempted to depict historical events both at Nootka Sound and in a Britain arming for war with Spain, but theatrical excess conveyed colonial ambivalence: the principal characters were too devious or plainly unsuitable for the Imperial project on Canada's west coast.

Performers in the play first depict naval marines rehearsing to stage the scenes of capture at Nootka Sound (the Spanish had captured several British merchantmen, their crews, and cargoes) then press gangs at work in Portsmouth, where a large war fleet is being assembled. But the lieutenant in charge tells several guests, who have come to watch the rehearsal, that the work is only "a slight specimen of Pantomime, Tragedy, Comedy, Opera and Farce, all together, egad!" (Hoffman 2000, 144). What are we to make of this devaluation, both of the overall "slight" show and its mishmash of genres (especially when juxtaposed with the play's jingoistic lyrics), except that the whole colonizing venture, even in its metropolitan application, was fraught with ambivalence – especially as perceived by one possible member of the audience, George Vancouver, who had been to Nootka Sound earlier with Cook and was soon to return to make his own famous voyages of exploration. Even the London newspaper critics found the piece wanting: while acknowledging the need for a patriotic gesture, they saw the work as unwieldy, the *Public Advertiser* (5 June 1790, 2) declaring the work "not of such a nature as to do any credit to the Royal Theatre." The work was considerably revised and re-presented twice, each time under new titles. In the third version, the enemy was now France! Thus began, if we need "beginnings," the formal representation of the province on an imperial stage, participant in a highly-charged political setting yet highly compromised by generic and thematic uncertainty. On one of London's largest stages, ships from various nations manoeuvred on British Columbia's uncertain waters.

We can see, then, that the "fact" of British Columbia theatre, modelled on this early formalization, has a lot to do with widely divergent peoples performing essentialist aspects of their culture on shifting, improvised stages. We can also see that the writing of British Columbia theatre is coterminous with these first *remembered* events. The earliest recorded activities took place between indigenous peoples and visiting traders, and were staged with great ceremony on coastal waters in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. James Cook's report on his first meeting with the local Nootka people, as they paddled their canoes towards the *Resolution* in Nootka Sound in 1778, immediately positioned them as performers and his European crew as audience:

> Having come pretty near us, a person in one of them stood up, and made a long harangue, inviting us to land, as we guessed by his gestures. At the same time he kept strewing handfuls of feathers

> towards us; and some of his companions threw handfuls of a red dust or powder in the same manner. The person who played the orator, wore the skin of some animal, and held, in each hand, something that rattled as he kept shaking it. (quoted in Clayton 2000, 17)

A decade later, John Meares, a British maritime trader, made a number of visits to Nootka Sound to acquire furs, fish, and timber. On one trip, he too witnessed a group of First Nations people in canoes, approaching "with great parade round the ship, singing at the same time a song of pleasing though sonorous melody." Considerably awestruck, Meares wrote (in some detail) what is likely the first theatrical review in the territory we now call British Columbia, thus further marking the area as *performed:* "There was also something for the eye as well as the ear; and the actions which accompanied their voices, added very much to the impression which the chanting made upon us all" (Meares 1790, 113).

For their part, the European and American explorers and traders presented a panoply of nautical performances of their own, enacting their roles not only in the (improvised) protocols of trade but also in the (scripted) articulations of imperial hegemony. This could be as simple as an impromptu musical concert on the deck of a trading vessel for a visiting chief or as impressive as a naval ship's magisterial entry into coastal waters (e.g., one of Britain's "wooden walls" fully rigged with regalia asserting sovereignty in the Pacific Northwest). The sailors' code of conduct was prescribed by European notions of science and morality: Cook's "crews were meant to be models of social order and moral strength, and Cook was to lead by example" (Clayton 2000, 9). Officers of the Royal Navy were expected to be familiar with the appropriate behaviours of dress (naval uniforms had only been recently standardized) and presentation as they declared the authority of state and commercial expansion in far-flung areas.

During this precolonial period, about seventy-five years in length, Aboriginal peoples and the small White population co-existed as sporadic trading partners, well before the intense colonizing pressure to acquire land and establish settlements that commenced in the 1850s. As dozens of mainly British and American vessels visited these shores, there were numerous performative acts, on ship and shore, employed by both Aboriginal and visitor alike in the rituals of trading. Cole Harris (1997/98, 60) has described how the maritime fur trade had "little ... fixity and stability. It was always highly mobile." These

improvisatory trading practices typically included processions, the approach of dignitaries, and the ceremonial offering of presents; and they were followed by invitations to feasting, dancing, and storytelling – all in the service of successful bartering. Daniel Clayton, among others, has noted the importance of these practices as they were carried out by various trading nations in the last decades of the eighteenth century. He reports that at Nootka Sound:

> Spanish officials tried to keep the peace between Natives and traders and formed close ties with the chiefs of the sound, dining with them regularly, attending Native feasts, being invited to important Native events, using Native people as messengers and informants. The American trader Joseph Ingraham suggested that the Native chiefs of the sound had been "polished" by the Spanish; the two groups engaged each other "with a great deal of ceremony – bowing, scraping, adieu senor." (Clayton 2000, 105)

From these ceremonies, we can conclude that, in this precolonial era, when there was a somewhat "reciprocal" (Fisher 1992, preface to 2nd ed.) balance of political and economic power, when no particular discourse laid claim to sole authority,[4] a dynamic, syncretic theatre tradition evolved. It was improvisatory, contestatory, forceful; it was as mobile and assertive as the constantly shifting ships and canoes upon which it was staged; and it was characterized as much by linguistic disjunction, mistranslation, and mistakes as it was by creativity and experiment. We can assume that many of these features continued into the colonial period, from 1849 to 1871, which Adele Perry (2001, 3) has characterized as "racially plural, rough, and turbulent." Since it was largely an oral culture, a whole set of unspoken, paralinguistic signs and practices was literally set in motion, while the rules of the discourse constantly altered. In effect, each group participated in an indigenizing process wherein the circulation of many different narratives, under as many social registers, took place

[4] I am aware of the counter argument, articulated very convincingly by Cole Harris (1997, 60) in *The Resettlement of British Columbia*, that, "if the fur trade was an encounter shaped by Native as well as white agency, it was not, I think, an equal encounter." Harris, however, does allow that the Natives were not simply "passive victims ... they sought to manipulate traders to their own ends." He also refers frequently to the "theatre of the fur trade," in which the remote White traders, lacking effective access to imperial law and enforcement, utilized a myriad of performative paraphernalia such as "salutes fired by the fort or a ship's guns, welcoming fusillades, trumpet calls, drum rolls, flags, demonstrations of superior marksmanship" in a "show of power" (57). This kind of "theatre," I maintain, operated substantially in various forms on both sides.

in a situation where the only common denominator was a sense of shared space. As Gilbert and Tompkins (1996, 167) have observed, "Oral cultures emphasize not only the sound and rhythm of language and its accompanying paralinguistic features, but also the site from which it is spoken." In this liminal space, the production of meaning is always ambivalent and, at the same time, full of possibility for creative, local formations. And always, geographic determinisms, however the land is conceived, are crucial.

Thus, from the very beginning, linked by mutually profitable relationships, the various groups displayed complex *hybrid* forms of performance as they appropriated and adapted aspects of their own and each other's cultures. But the nature of this hybridity, like the divisive politics of the province, has been one of resistance and oppositionality rather than assimilative mutuality. We can read, for example, of the stark contrasts between cultures in the experience of several early performers: of the great receptions accorded a Nootka man, Comekela, who performed each nation to the other. Taken to Europe, he was displayed in his West Coast habiliments; afterwards, Meares (1790, 109) returned him to his home in Nootka Sound, now dressed in "scarlet regimented coat, decorated with brass buttons – a military hat set off with a flaunting cockade, decent linens, and other appendages of European dress [which excited] the extreme admiration of his countrymen." We can recall John Jewitt, captive of Maquinna, living as an Aboriginal and then escaping to replay his captivity in front of American audiences in the United States.[5] In these examples, we can feel the mutual, transformative potential between cultures just as much as we can see the great distance between them.

I believe that it is in this potent intercultural mix, in this polyphony of dissonant voices, that we will find, if we are ever to find, the model and theory of a true "British Columbia Theatre." On these tidal waters, on in-between space, interculturation took place with its attendant negotiation, contestation, and appropriation. In other words, intricate, localized forms of hybridity were set in motion. I am suggesting that these forms, barely discussed in the literature so far, closely model the kind of postcolonial theatre that the province has, only recently, seen slowly developing – *and which, according to*

[5] Collaborating with playwright James Nelson Barker, Jewitt wrote *The Armourer's Escape; Or, Three Years at Nootka Sound.* The show opened on 21 March 1817 at the Philadelphia Theatre and ran for three performances, with Jewitt playing himself. For discussion of the production, see Edmond S. Meany, "The Later Life of John R. Jewitt," in *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 4, 3 (1940): 143-61.

the critics, we have yet to replicate. In the following period, during the age of settlement theatre, from the mid-1800s until at least the 1960s, the dominant British/American culture silenced this archive. Significantly, it is in this latter period that many British Columbia theatre historians begin their record.

Retaining this image of floating stages gliding disruptively through our flamboyant theatre history, we can now track some of the major recorders and critics of British Columbia theatre. Watch for the image in the movement of canoes and warships, the comings and goings of touring shows, the rising and falling of theatre buildings, the appearance and disappearance of theatre groups – all signs of the deeply palimpsestic nature of our theatre. We could borrow a descriptive phrase from the Nuu-chah-nulth, who had a name for the European visitors they encountered in the days of first contact: "those whose houses float about on water" (Hoover 2000, 2).

One of the first things the reader will notice is the enormous gap in what the writers have examined. According to the archaeological record, the province has had about ten thousand years or so of human history (Carlson 1996, 14) plus well over two centuries of contact history. However, most of those who have kept the record of theatre in British Columbia have only looked at the most recent century and a half, despite the fact that articles have chronicled the significance of precolonial First Nations (Courtenay 1985, 1989), Viking (Gardner 1997), and early explorer/Aboriginal (Filewod 2002) performances in other parts of Canada. Even if we begin with British Columbia contact history during the late eighteenth century (when the written record substantially begins), there is still an enormous silence between the era of the early explorers and traders (1780s) and the period of settlement (1850s) when most theatre, according to our chroniclers, "began." Forgetting amounts to a major topos in the writing of British Columbia theatre.

Indeed, even when we look for substantial articles written in the recent past, a reader's first reaction might well be: Is that all there is? Am I missing something? It is true that good, substantial articles are in short supply and that books are almost non-existent. There are of course occasional newspaper articles that are little more than brief chronologies or reminiscences of touring or amateur shows, sometimes with breathless titles like "Birth of the Drama" (*Vancouver Province*, 25 August 1951), as well as sections in books such as C.H. Davis's (1976) *The Vancouver Book*, which simply provides juicy

anecdotes: the town's "earliest regular attraction," we learn, was provided by the "Darktown Fire Brigade," former slaves who mounted a lively parade through town once a month (McKenzie, 412). More recently, some newspaper critics have written good accounts of theatre people and companies; these are based on interviews and allow for valuable primary perspectives. See, for example, Audrey Johnson's article on Victoria's Belfry Theatre in the *Times-Colonist* (22 November 1986, C8) and Peter Birnie's feature on Bill Millerd and his Arts Club Theatre in the *Vancouver Sun* (26 May 2001, E12-E13).

As well, numerous journals and reminiscences allude in small ways to theatrical activity. Dr. John Helmcken (1958, 387), writing of his first days in Fort Victoria in 1850, describes the efforts of the men in Bachelors' Hall to "entertain the company" by, among other activities, bouncing around the room "kangaroo fashion" in order to "escort Her Majesty to Windsor Castle." The second entry in Dale McIntosh's *A Documentary History of Music in Victoria* (1981) alludes to the performance of private theatricals, while the diary entries of Robert Melrose (n.d.) make reference to play performances: "Splendid Theatre on board the Frigate 'Trincomalee,'" on 18 October 1853. A program for the opening of the Victoria Theatre in 1885 contains an article tracing the theatre history of the province from the 1850s. This new theatre was clearly a mark of "the future prosperity of Victoria, the Premier City of the British Pacific" (Souvenir of the Opening of the Victoria Theatre, 19 October 1885). But the record of nineteenth-century performances probably reaches further back than has been acknowledged thus far. Patrick O'Neill, a specialist in early maritime theatre, has found evidence that officers on board HMS *Herald*, conducting a hydrographic survey off the coast of British Columbia and Alaska in the late 1840s, performed plays that included Moliere's *The Mock Doctor* (Patrick O'Neill, personal communication, 4 September 2001). In any case, within a decade, with the influx of the 1858 gold rush, there were "three theatres in full blast" (Pethick 1968, 210) according to the local press. Citizens in this now bustling community could see performances of *Othello* and *Hamlet*, along with numerous private and amateur entertainments, and read reviews in the local newspapers.

The first few academic articles appear with emphatic, self-validating titles such as "The Beginnings of Theatre in British Columbia" (Booth 1961) and "Legitimate Theatre in Early Victoria" (Elliott 1970). These are mainly lists of stagings – performance calendars with little in the

way of overt social or historical context. When connections are made, and this is not often, they tend to yoke economic and theatrical activity in the colony, the first inspiring the second. Academic weight comes from a plethora of carefully researched data and an obsession with "firsts" – first theatre, first performances, and, especially, first professional company, as though discovery of this last, like the discovery of the fabled Northwest Passage, would lead to great riches.

This archive consists of just over two dozen articles written between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s, mostly in academic journals, that describe theatre in the colonial period; that is, from the 1850s, when the first records of performance appear, to the 1960s, when modern, continuing professional theatre was established in the larger cities. In these writings, floating is no longer central: the impetus now is to conclude the journey, to land the vessels and establish permanence. These writers engage in the colonizing process themselves, mapping what are assumed to be the blank spaces of theatrum nullum and inscribing an ideology of imperial control. Many are little more than catalogues of names and dates in the reinscription of the territory as a venue for Euro-American theatre.

Even as late as 1982, for example, it was still possible to define "indigenous theatre" with little reference to Aboriginal or immigrant performance. In his useful survey of the resources available for the writing of a British Columbia theatre, Andrew Parkin (1982, 102) asserts that "indigenous British Columbia theatre, as it exists now, is an offshoot of British and American theatre, so far as they are distinguishable; it owes little or nothing to Chinese or Indian theatre." Like many others, he notes that theatre in this province began in the 1850s, on a British warship, which, interestingly, means that the performances did not actually take place in British Columbia since they "occurred technically on British soil" (103).

Michael Booth, former head of theatre at the University of Victoria and probably the province's first real theatre historian, assembled a series of four articles that were published in several journals. His work is exemplary in its use of solid research alongside colourful anecdote combined with some social context. In "Pioneer Entertainment," Booth compares the theatrical tastes of audiences in Victoria and Barkerville, the first heavily reliant on touring professionals (usually from California), the second on amateurs. Victoria's taste in drama, he concludes, was not very different from "any small British Provincial theatre of the period" (Booth 1960a, 58). Another article, "Theatrical

Boom in the Kootenays," delights in recounting the tale of the notorious Theatre Comique in Kaslo, with its female "box-rustlers" and ongoing problems with the authorities who, as in other cities, were divided between enjoying the revenue from licensing the theatre and worrying about its reputation, since "decent citizens" thought of it "as a hellhole" (Booth 1961b, 45). In "Gold Rush Theatre: The Theatre Royal, Barkerville," Booth (1960b) continues to link the occasion of theatre with the patterns of settlement.

Almost a decade passed before further academic work appeared. In 1969 Craig Elliott, a student at the University of Washington, completed his PhD dissertation entitled "Annals of the Legitimate Theatre in Victoria, Canada from the Beginning to 1900."[6] This is mainly a performance calendar, with little in the way of social or cultural context. As suggested in the title, Elliott emphasizes beginnings and markers of theatrical culture, which is appropriate for a study in which the colonized land is determined by the names, dates, and places of the colonizers. The long lists of plays embody the colonial interest in (re)naming and its corollary, silencing. Value is placed on hierarchy: legitimate rather than popular theatre is privileged, as are certain stage roles and visiting stars such as Charles Kean. We learn that "more legitimate companies played in Victoria in the 1890s than at any other time during the 19th century" and that "one hundred and thirty-nine legitimate companies performed on the Victoria stages during the decade" (Elliott 1969, 221). This information is married to the performance of the railroad and steamship companies, now capable of delivering this activity into (and out of) the province.[7] Similarly, Sheila Roberts (1971) lists the venues (including photographs of the Imperial Opera House, the Vancouver Opera House, and the Empress Theatre) and productions of Shakespeare in Vancouver, from the 1880s to 1918.

Thus a fiction is firmly established: that the development and meaning of an indigenous theatre is closely tied to settler allegories. Intrepid actors, bravely passing over impossible roadways and winning over uncertain audiences, are analogues of the explorers and pioneers; and their performances, in so far as they are legitimate and professional, are the markers of colonial accomplishment. The successful staging of major British or American plays or musicals is the bench-

[6] See a condensed version of this dissertation in Craig Elliott, 1970, "Legitimate Theatre in Early Victoria," *British Columbia Historical News* 3, 3: 6-14.

[7] For a later, similarly grounded academic work, see Peter Guildford (1981).

mark, while popular shows such as circus or vaudeville are denigrated. As for any truly "native" performance, such as those of the Aboriginal peoples, any prior knowledge is silenced under the edifice of objective data collection and scholarly organization.

The late 1980s saw several summary attempts to describe a British Columbia theatre. In *English-Canadian Theatre,* co-authors Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (1987) rehearse the familiar trope of the struggle of foreign companies against incredible odds – climate, geography, religious opposition, and inadequate facilities. They briefly acknowledge earlier Aboriginal performance, but claim it "had little influence on subsequent theatrical development" (2). In Benson and Conolly's *Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* (1989), beginnings are again tied to the European military productions of the mid-nineteenth century and are traced up to the 1960s, when British Columbia theatre, finally, successfully "[came] of age" (Todd 1989, 62) with the founding of professional companies such as the Playhouse and Arts Club in Vancouver and the Bastion in Victoria. Amateur theatre is in decline; theatre is now tied to institutions, including post-secondary programs, buildings, and public funding. The criteria for such success are unstated, beyond the usual, congratulatory achievements of buildings. Replicating the centre/colony binary, Todd implies that British Columbia theatre is Vancouver-centric, the Interior having only occasionally "benefited from the touring undertaken by Vancouver companies" (63).

In a similar article, "The Organization of Professional Theatre in Vancouver, 1886-1914," Robert Todd (1979/80) validates a local theatre by showing its connection to external forces and the triumphs of capitalism and technology. Thus Vancouver's professional theatre became "rich and varied" in the early decades of the twentieth century because "it was always one of the satellites of the major theatrical centre of San Francisco, and later ... Seattle" (4). The city's main task was to provide theatre buildings worthy of this infusion of talent, keep them running, and occasionally build a major venue through local capital (e.g., the Imperial Opera House built in 1889) or corporate money (e.g., the lavish Vancouver Opera House built in 1891 by the Canadian Pacific Railway as an adjunct to its downtown hotel).

One lingering, usually unspoken, assumption through all this is that the touring professionals might somehow eventually inspire a local legitimate theatre. Their inspiration was sought well into the 1930s, when touring came to an end. But only in the past few decades

have critics begun to hint at their role in stimulating local activity. In the early 1980s, Robert Lawrence (1980), as part of his greater project of documenting the activities of British touring performers in Canada, wrote articles on Marie Tempest and John Martin-Harvey, both of whom visited the province as part of their Canadian tours. Each left behind a trail of commentary – from the stars themselves, from their reviewers, and, in the case of Tempest, from a member of her company, Graham Browne, who kept a diary. Peter Brigg (1980) similarly recorded the early 1930s theatrical tour of Barry Jackson, director of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. These performers confirmed the metropolitan values so longed for by the province's many British immigrants, although their critical reception ranged from adulation to outright dismissal, the *Province* calling Martin-Harvey's production of *The King's Messenger* a "hotch-potch of the most awful nonsense" (3 March 1932, quoted in Lawrence 1980, 239). These performers, like many others, had been inspired by the successful North American tours of Henry Irving, England's premier actor in the late 1800s, well known as a serious performer and stage innovator who also brought strong imperial cachet: he was the first actor to be knighted. That they primarily inculcated imperial values is undeniable; as one newspaper reported: "We have had the Bensons and Cyril Maude and Lawrence Irving and Martin Harvey and Forbes Robinson. In a few months they have done more than all the statesmen of England ... to nourish and strengthen Imperial sentiment in Canada" (quoted in Lawrence 1982, 151).

Lawrence (1980, 240) faults Tempest and Martin-Harvey for failing "to elevate Canadian theatre taste and for inhibiting the development of modern Canadian drama." At the same time, however, a number of these leading lights of the British stage were articulate promoters (as was Irving) of theatrical innovation and change, thus bringing to the province potential for rethinking the European theatrical inheritance. Jackson was a leading practitioner of the Little Theatre movement, and Martin-Harvey, who succeeded Irving as manager of London's famed Lyceum Theatre, was conversant with recent European staging methods. Both gave frequent lectures, Martin-Harvey "repeatedly [referring] to the desirability of a national theatre in Canada" (Lawrence 1980, 235), Jackson hoping his work would "set an example for emerging Canadian drama" (Brigg 1980, 251). This line of thought, however, is rarely followed by the critics. There is minimal investigation into the implications of the repertoire

selected by these performers, many of whom, especially Marie Tempest and Martin-Harvey, were stars not so much of the London stage as of provincial touring in Britain. Lawrence (1980, 236) notes that Martin-Harvey's choices for Canada, which included "sentimental nineteenth-century romances ... give a misleading impression" of his significant work in Britain, which included important stagings of Shakespeare and Greek classics.

Nor do the critics make links to locally based productions that could be seen to reflect or counter the work of these luminaries. Case in point: in 1932, only three years after Jackson's visit to Vancouver, the city saw its most compelling show ever, a highly controversial production of the pro-union play *Waiting for Lefty* that was staged as the city faced massive labour unrest climaxed by a violent waterfront strike. The police tried to close down the production, but it continued to play to capacity audiences and then went on to win awards at the Dominion Drama Festival in Ottawa. A later article gives a lively, scholarly account of this production in Vancouver and beyond but barely recognizes that a local theatre exists, especially one already constitutive of contestatory values; rather, it suggests that *Waiting for Lefty* is unique because it alone demonstrates "the impact of drama as a tool to educate, motivate, and organize" (Bray 1990, 106).

Indeed, locating the many strategies at work in the decolonization of the theatre of British Columbia over time, while seemingly a major task for its critical writers, has been slow in coming. This is another legacy of the deeply entrenched colonial system that instituted a cultural hierarchy wherein certain forms of communication are privileged over others. The "legitimate" theatre is valued as a mark of civilization; it signifies principally by generating a body of literate, *written* commentary – scripts, reviews, articles, diaries – that demonstrate compliance with official modes of artistic expression; oral practices, such as indigenous or popular performances, are seen as inferior or primitive. So when attempts at decolonization actually do occur in the theatre, often marked by an excess of performance values, they are barely recognized in the critical literature. This is evident in articles I have written about three directors who operated ongoing theatrical ventures in the 1920s and 1940s. Each, in varying ways, imported notions of European theatre; but each also made important gestures recognizing a distinct British Columbia theatre (Hoffman 1986, 1987, and 1987-88).

"Major" Bullock-Webster operated a theatre school in Victoria and occasionally in Vancouver during the 1920s. Formerly a London West End actor, "emphatically English, with a forceful, cultured mien ... and impressive London theatre credits" (Hoffman 1987, 210), he seems at first glance to be a full-fledged advocate of English culture. He taught correct speech, elocution, and deportment, notably emphasizing the elimination of "local peculiarities" and testing his students before guest examiners connected with the British stage. At the same time, however, he was part of a postwar city that was changing: he met Victoria's needs as a city reinventing itself as a "tourist and residential Mecca ... and cultural capital of British Columbia" (209). With the city evolving from an industrial to a social and cultural centre, he played a vital, public role in rearranging the accoutrements of both old and new. In particular need of study are his mammoth outdoor pageants, such as *Danae, or the Birth of Perseus* and *Ivanhoe*, featuring casts of hundreds drawn from many elements of society. Both of these plays replicated the exotic glories of Empire as well as creatively reconfiguring the diverse elements of civic authority. In addition, he was knowledgeable about Canadian theatre history and lectured his students on Canadian drama, announcing that "the school's policy has always been to encourage the development of talent ... to bring credit to the Canadian stage" (217).

Canadian-born Carroll Aikins had travelled in Europe and witnessed the Little Theatre movement: his play *The God of Gods* was staged at Barry Jackson's Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1919. Soon, on the advice of several leading lights of the North American Little Theatre movement (e.g., Maurice Browne of Chicago and Lee Simonson of New York), he was operating a theatre school at his Home Theatre, which was built in an apple orchard on his property near Naramata. With his company, the Canadian Players, Aikins applied the Little Theatre principles of sparely but poetically staging works in an atmosphere of perfectionist detail and devotion to artistic ideals. He recruited and trained student actors from across Canada, his rhetoric supporting the notion of "Canadian plays by Canadian actors" (Hoffman 1986, 56), although he mainly staged works by British and American playwrights. His production methods, particularly his directing and staging, need further examination, particularly as he played to local audiences that included First Nations. In addition, the plays he wrote also need to be studied because they reflect his experience of British Columbia.

A third man, Sydney Risk, founded Vancouver's modern professional theatre company, the Everyman. He too took much of his essential inspiration from Europe, having trained at London's Old Vic, then worked with several English repertory companies. Risk, however, had deep roots in British Columbia: born in Vancouver, he acted with the Players Club at the University of British Columbia, succeeding the club's director and founder, Frederic Wood, after he graduated in 1931. His great contribution was to found in 1946 a professional company that provided work and ongoing training for local actors. His downfall came when his company staged an adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's controversial novel, *Tobacco Road*, which was closed when police entered the stage during a performance and arrested cast members. Although Risk left little in the way of "dramatic innovation ... writings ... or unusual concepts or theories" (Hoffman 1987/88, 56), his extraordinary energy and vision stimulated the formation of other groups in the 1950s (e.g., the Totem and Holiday Theatre companies). Risk, like the other two visionaries, made important contributions to the local development of theatre, especially in the inspiration and training of theatre people starting their careers. He too requires further study based on additional data and appropriate theoretical perspectives.

Chad Evans's *Frontier Theatre* (1983) still remains, two decades after publication, a seminal reference work, mixing a good deal of detail and anecdote with a modicum of social commentary. Subtitled "A History of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainment in the Canadian Far West and Alaska," it represents the first sustained attempt to characterize a unique performance typology for the province: "The predominant face is commercial American, the second has the demeanour of effete British dilettantism, the third is as indigenous as a Kwakiutl ceremonial mask" (9). Like his predecessors, however, Evans emphasizes only the first two on his list (i.e., imported European and American performances as they operated in this province). Indigenous theatrical culture, as it was narrowly defined then, was anything produced by settler society.

Evans's work is necessary and exemplary in many ways, especially in its consideration of both legitimate and popular forms of entertainment as well as in its description of activities in different areas of the province (e.g., the Cariboo and Kootenays). Yet so far no major works have extended or challenged Evans: there has been no companion volume documenting the twentieth century, either in

whole or in part, nor any of the staples of conventional theatre research: performance calendars, chronologies, biographies, collections of reviews, or books of essays. Thus we have another gap: while the existing articles suggest a formidable history of theatrical activity in the province, they also assert that fuller descriptions cannot, may not ever, be written. The reasons given are various: a debilitating absence of documentation (Page 1990, 92); the sheer "difficulty in theorizing anything unified as 'BC Theatre'" (R. Gilbert 2000, 3); and the self-limitations the writers themselves impose in terms of place (many articles are Vancouver-centric), time (*everything* happened in the last 150 years), or genre (Euro/American-plays, traditional theatre buildings, and professional theatre companies). Hence, two conclusions might be reached: either British Columbia has no substantial theatre history, certainly none that could be advanced as a cultural marker of province or nation, or the history we do have is compromised because it resists present methods of scholarship. The truth of the matter is that we need to look beyond, far beyond, the work of recent theatre historians, to a discourse in which we find attention being paid to the gaps. It is here that we may also find the beginnings of a postcolonial British Columbia theatre.

Really, the first academic theatre historians are the anthropologists and archaeologists who found the ceremonial activities and extraordinary displays of the First Nations peoples of the province to be the most flamboyant in North America. They report numerous details of an extraordinary artistic culture, Boas writing that his "fancy was first struck by the flight of imagination exhibited by the works of art of the British Columbians" (Hoffman 1985, 232). He returned several times to record their activities and exhibited several performances at the Chicago World's Fair. More recently, Peter Macnair (1973/74, 94), believing that their "drama is there as a fully developed art," records a reenactment of the Kwakiutl Winter Dance, with descriptive text and superb photographs.

For a long while – in fact, until recent publications by First Nations peoples themselves – the works of these anthropologists have constituted the essential record of Aboriginal ceremonial life. So why haven't theatre historians used these sources? Most likely because these works too often seem to be faceless scientific recordings of data, dry listings of activities and artifacts; or they display reserved or prudish attitudes; or they exoticize what are clearly perceived to be disconnected, marginal cultures. Consider, for example, Marius Barbeau's (1958)

occasional use of qualifying quotation marks and parenthetical remarks, which enact his own performance as an ambivalent audience of the Other. For him, a Haida shaman is "possessed" (56); elsewhere, he observes a shaman's activities "in hiding" (64). The problem, as mentioned, is that text-based records often fail to adequately describe entire dimensions of oral culture, a whole performative archive of movement, gesture, emotion, interaction, and spirit.

American anthropologist Victor Turner agrees: "Cognitizing the connections, we fail to form a satisfactory impression of how another culture's members 'experience' one another" (Turner and Turner 1982, 33). The solution, for some, has been to adopt modes of performance themselves by, for example, becoming members of Aboriginal societies and participating firsthand in their social and ceremonial life. Ralph Maud (1982, 18-19) records how one ethnologist, himself Aboriginal-born, on the advice of Boas learned how to be a good storyteller, "with all their gestures," then recorded the stories – now in livelier fashion – on phonographic discs. Barbeau performed on phonographic records, where he "talks, and sings, and beats the drum with the best of the 'manhunters'" (116). This intermingling of performances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal has been pursued more recently in an educational setting. Turner has contributed to a small but interesting archive: the scripting of Aboriginal performance for performance by non-Aboriginals. With the premise that "reading written words kowtows to the cognitive dominance of written matter and relies on the arbitrariness of the connection between the penned or printed sign and its meaning," Turner added elements of live performance to better understand the hamatsa ceremony (Turner and Turner 1982, 41). Calling his work ethnodramaturgy, Turner scripted a potlatch and a hamatsa ceremony, then staged them with his anthropology students at Northwestern University. Similarly, journalist and playwright Eric Nicol (1975) conjoined West Coast Aboriginal ceremony and contemporary Western theatre in his play for young audiences, *The Clam Made a Face*, first staged in Vancouver in 1968.

Franz Boas is undoubtedly pre-eminent in the field of British Columbia anthropology. He first glimpsed Aboriginal British Columbians in a performative context – as he watched and was "overjoyed" by a touring group of Bella Coola dancers in Berlin. Soon, in the fall of 1886, he was on Vancouver Island, among the Kwakwaka'wakw, where he observed a series of ceremonial feasts, dances, and shamanic healings, and where he eventually gave his own potlatch. Boas's *The*

Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians (1970) must be considered a classic. In this work, he details the complex workings of the potlatches in a society that highly valued "the ability to give great festivals" (Boas 1970, 343).

In the writing of an identifiable British Columbia theatre, there was no consideration of Aboriginal culture as a matrix for a wider discussion of theatrical activity until the mid-1980s, although, interestingly, it was the Twenty-First World Congress of the International Theatre Institute in Montreal and Toronto that helped extend the discourse. A collection of essays was prepared for the occasion to tell the world about modern Canadian theatre. In his essay, Richard Courtney (1985, 206) states that "modern performances must be understood in the context of the past," by which he means the Aboriginal past. Courtney now speaks of "ritual drama" as an important part of understanding performance as it contains "proto-theatrical elements." A large part of his essay discusses Northwest Coast Salish and Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonies, suggesting that the ritual ceremonies of Aboriginal peoples perhaps need to reach theatrical form. Courtney makes the valuable connection between Aboriginal and Western genres. However, he still makes no attempt to conflate the two other than by comparing the ritual dramas to older Western dramatic genres such as the medieval mystery play.

In an article of my own, published the same year, I also consider First Nations ceremonials on their own terms as theatre and drama (Hoffman 1985), utilizing Richard Schechner's definition of performance as a complex of activities existing along an efficacy/entertainment dyad. Schechner, an American performance scholar, has been influential in linking the operations of ritual and aesthetic performance patterns as they interweave – sometimes far apart, sometimes close together – through time and in different cultures. He discusses ritual as having the element of efficacy, which means achieving real communal results such as the paying of debts, the distribution of food, or the raising of social status (Schechner 1977, 63-98). Critics have long noted how the Kwakwaka'wakw hamatsa ceremony, of all Aboriginal ritual dramas, perhaps most perfectly combines the sacred and the purely theatrical. Peter Macnair (1973/4, 94), among others, describes "a flamboyant stagecraft unsurpassed by any other North American Indian group."

Using data from anthropologists, I conclude that the ceremony is a close intermix of the two strands, combining strong efficacious

elements (e.g., the central action, which concerns raising the status of the initiate) with powerful aesthetic, entertainment elements in the prodigious stagecraft, the use of giant masks, puppets, and even sleight-of-hand. Then, taking a cue from the anthropologist Thomas McIlwraith (1943, 35), who said that "the rituals were essentially dramatic performances, with equipment including masks and ingenious mechanical devices which were regarded with wonder by those who were not members of the group," I discuss the hamatsa ceremony as having dramatic structure in the Western sense of a coherent script. Indeed, I found that it has similarities to the five-act play.

Another vital area of research is the archive of Aboriginal performances assembled specifically for non-Aboriginal audiences, especially on the international stage. Here, audiences witness performances they believe are wholly authentic, Aboriginals really being themselves in their natural state – what Schechner (1997, 77) calls "believed-in performances ... [where] ... people are who they perform, playing their social and/or personal identities." This occurred first as the early explorers took Aboriginal captives back to Europe for display, thus demonstrating what was conventionally assumed to be a savage, passive culture. We are learning, however, that First Nations peoples were and still are quite capable of transmuting the work of colonialism into the spectacle of a revitalized, even resistant, culture. Invited to out-of-country exhibitions, or even touristic ventures at home, they performed ceremonies sometimes officially banned (as was the potlatch in 1884) and now valued by the dominant society as "authentic" experience. For the performers, however, the ceremonials could be strategically selected and adapted to assert Aboriginal culture in ways unintended and unnoticed by the organizers of the various exhibitions. In addition, these performers also met Aboriginal peoples from other countries, inevitably becoming more politicized as common issues of land and rights were discussed.

One of the most dramatic of these performances must certainly have been offered by the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, which was held to mark the anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the New World. Their appearance was largely the work of Boas, who collected a great amount of Northwest Coast Aboriginal material for display, especially that of the Kwakwa̲ka̲'wakw, who were deemed the "standard tribe ... because ... they were central to the region's culture" (Cole 1999, 153). Historian Paige Raibmon (2000,

158) has thoroughly described their performance context in Chicago as they enacted a version of the hamatsa dance: "The spectators in Chicago watched with a mixture of fascination and revulsion as the most lurid imaginings of wild and savage Indians played out before their eyes."

This whole affair in Chicago may seem to have been a regressive step for the Kwakwaka'wakw, reaffirming colonial notions that such practices were primitive and outmoded, that these tradition-bound people were in desperate need of the benefits of civilization – as indeed was being demonstrated in a contrasting exhibit set up by the Canadian government that depicted well-scrubbed Aboriginal children in a modern classroom setting. The Kwakwaka'wakw, according to Raibmon, strategically asserted the dynamic aspect of their culture. Their response to colonialism was a creative one: "they were producing something new" (160). If the government's whitewashed display of classroom gentility masked the deep problems of Canada's Aboriginal peoples – their dispossession, poverty and disease, and the violence of the residential schools – then the "wild" performance of the Kwakwaka'wakw was an effective "counter-image [with] the potential to undermine Canada's peaceful, civilized façade" (170). In addition, the Kwakwaka'wakw were proving how adaptable their culture was to contemporary imperialist culture; in effect, they were showing the world that their "authentic" culture was a vital, living thing, capable of successfully marrying ritual, aesthetic, and political elements.

Two decades later, Edward Curtis filmed his monumental *In the Land of the Head Hunters*, subtitled "A Drama of Primitive Life on the Shores of the North Pacific." Curtis was another non-Aboriginal enacting the protocols of trade on West Coast shores, his commerce being in photography and film. He too became infatuated with the Northwest Coast peoples, particularly the Kwakwaka'wakw, who he believed "had retained a remarkable amount of their traditional culture" (Holm and Quimby 1980, 31). With an eye to its reinscription as aesthetic event, he described Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial life in the language of drama: "I ... found that while their plays are not written, they are prepared with almost as keen a sense of dramatic value as might be expected of the successful modern playwright" (121). His intention, in his own words, was enthnographic: to "[illustrate], so far as possible, the activities of their lives, particularly domestic and ceremonial ... [to produce] an unquestioned document" (32); he was,

of course, also motivated by money, hoping "the film would make a profit of $100,000 in the first year" (*Vancouver Sun*, 24 April 1984, D1).

The resulting film is a complex admixture of contemporary performance styles, of pre-First World War filmmaking and Aboriginal ceremony, as well as Kwakwaka'wakw myth and Hollywood melodrama. Despite the filmmaker's intention to depict authenticity, the project clearly has an exploitative aspect. This is evident in his construction of false fronts depicting "authentic" villages (many Kwakwaka'wakw homes now had non-Aboriginal features such as frame building, milled lumber, and glass windows); the calculated dressing up of the Aboriginal actors ("In Curtis' time no Kwakiutl man or woman habitually wore true native dress" [Holm and Quimby 1980, 31]); and, more seriously, the reluctance of some performers to participate. By his own account, it took Curtis several months to "break down the natives' prejudice against acting for such a purpose the ceremonies which they held as sacred" (Holm and Quimby 1980, 122). In the contest between the stated ethnographic purpose of showing the "customs, amusements, fights, domestic life, and sports of the North American Indians" (125) and the entertainment purpose of the superimposed melodramatic tale of heroes and villains, it was the latter that won out. The role of Curtis as *auteur* appropriator, his conflicting functions as recorder and director, his relationship with George Hunt (the high-status Kwakwaka'wakw[8] who acted as intermediary), the possibilities of First Nations agency – all of these need to be examined by writers wishing to construct a British Columbia theatre.

In a similar manner, although now with authoritative participation by First Nations peoples, displays represented as authentic Aboriginal culture have been staged in the context of art/museum exhibitions. In each case, performative elements were added to provide a counter-discourse to the static museum display of artifacts. In 1998 the Vancouver Art Gallery presented a large-scale display of Northwest Coast masks entitled "Down from the Shimmering Sky," which was curated in part by Robert Joseph, a Kwakwaka'wakw chief. The powerful masks, drawn from many sources, were carefully displayed "in a manner that acknowledges their social and ceremonial meaning" (Macnair and Grenville 1998, 15). This was done in part by locating many of the masks on varying lengths of poles in a darkened room

[8] Hunt's authority derived in part from his rich hybrid connections. While his father was a Scot and his mother was Tlingit, he was raised among the Kwakwaka'wakw at Fort Rupert on Vancouver Island.

that had been ritually authorized, each mask seeming to have a space and spirituality of its own. In addition, the Atlakim Dancers demonstrated the masks in regular dance performances in the gallery. The following year, the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria held a major exhibition entitled "Out of the Mist: Treasures of the Nuu-chah-nulth Chiefs," which featured artifacts assembled and presented under the guidance of an elders advisory council. Ceremonial items, carved masks, headdresses, rattles, and whistles were displayed in dramatic settings that positioned the viewers as participants in living Aboriginal life. For each of these major exhibitions, substantial books were produced, further elaborating the cultures under display. Indeed, First Nations authors have written a growing number of books and articles on ceremony. Of particular note is *Potlatch at Gitsegukla: William Beynon's 1945 Notebooks* (Anderson and Halpin 2000). Beynon, whose mother was Tsimshian, assisted Barbeau and Boas as interpreter and collector; in January 1945, he attended a series of potlatches at the Gitskan village of Gitsegukla, near Hazelton, and produced four detailed notebooks of the ceremonies. The editors claim that these notes are "undoubtedly the most perceptive and complete account of potlatching in the written literature" (3).

Certainly one of the province's largest intercultural performances was the opening ceremony of the XV Commonwealth Games held in Victoria in 1994. Along with the usual pomp of dignitaries making their entrances, the raising of flags, and the RCMP musical ride, the Coast Salish people, on whose traditional territory the event took place, performed a welcome ceremony, and their neighbours, the Kwakwaka'wakw, staged a creation myth. As the various nationalities creatively asserted essential values across wide cultural spaces, it seemed that we had returned to the precolonial era – the time of the floating stages. In many ways, it seems to mark a watershed in postcolonial performance.

Discussing this event, Sheila Rabillard (1999, 79) admirably indicates a direction much needed in British Columbia theatre criticism: an exploration of the competing politics and positionalities embodied through performance in this massive public ceremony – "a series of potentially dissonant readings of the event." Queen Elizabeth the Second, she suggests, who was officially welcomed by the Salish, can be seen as a regal spectator exercising her own imperial authority, as a pawn in a postcolonial state performing its role in the modern

economies of capitalism and multiculturalism, or simply as a guest on the territory of the Salish. Rabillard finds the whole affair to be "an extraordinary piece of political theatre: the enactment of complex circulations of power between colonizer and colonized, monarch and subjects, guest and host, marginalized group and dominant culture" (78).

Although we have seen few sustained attempts to articulate the theatre of the province through the writing of books, two special issues of the journal *Canadian Theatre Review* have been devoted to British Columbia theatre. In his introduction to the first, published in 1984, editor Malcolm Page (1984, 5) states that he had hoped to include a historical survey of theatre in the province but "then found no-one who felt qualified to write it." He states that British Columbia theatre "is its own world," that its practitioners have "a confidence amounting to arrogance." This stance is not developed, even though in an earlier issue of the same journal Renate Usmiani (1981), discussing the formation and vision of two of the West Coast's important companies, Tamahnous and Savage God, provides a reason: that theatre on the West Coast, in this case its alternative theatre, was indeed different from its counterpart in eastern Canada, which was then politically and socially activist. Alternative theatre in Vancouver, Usmiani writes, was "introspective, reflecting the West Coast interest in drug culture, in Freudian psychology, Gestalt and other psychotherapies as practiced at the Esalen Institute" (28).[9]

Most articles in the first special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* recount success stories in Vancouver's recent professional theatre, and there is a nod to an Interior theatre company in an article on Theatre Energy, a collective group devoted to telling local history in the Kootenays (Hoffman 1984). One bonus: because many of the professional theatre companies studied have recent histories, it was relatively easy to ask the participants to write their own story. The results were excellent primary accounts of Vancouver's Touchstone Theatre by Ian Fenwick (1984), one of its founders, and of City Stage, with an interview with its director, Ray Michal (Wallace 1984). Similarly, the issue is notable for its criticism of Vancouver theatre critics. In "Why Are the Critics So Bad?" playwright John Lazarus (1984, 49) accuses the city's critics of racism and sexism as well as "a breathtaking ignorance of how the professional theatre works."[10]

[9] This article also appears in Usmiani's book, published two years later. See Usmani (1983).

[10] For several other good articles about theatre companies written by key personnel, see David Diamond (1991) and Stephen E. Miller (1998). David Diamond is director of Headlines Theatre of Vancouver and Stephen Miller is a founder of Vancouver's Tamahnous Theatre.

Lazarus hearkened back to "saner times" in the 1970s, when "two of our best critics," Christopher Dafoe and Max Wyman, wrote newspaper reviews. Although each had limited practical experience in the theatre, both men seemed to truly care; for them, the performing arts seriously mattered in the city's social and cultural formation. Dafoe's work as *Sun* critic (1968-1975) has been characterized in my article (Hoffman 1999) as challenging the modernist strictures of the city – its isolation and smugness, its lingering colonial mentality – by altering the critic's relationship with his readers and engaging them in critical dialogue. He usefully provided end-of-the-year reviews of a theatre company's season of plays, encouraged local performers and playwrights, and frequently provided thoughtful, sometimes humorous, perspectives, even reinventing himself comically as the critic "Gumbo" – a burlesque not only of the city's theatre community taking itself too seriously but also of his own commentaries.

Malcolm Page, a critic whose knowledge of modern Vancouver theatre is impressively encyclopedic, has written detailed chronologies of the city's theatre, comparing the accomplishments of different theatre companies, identifying phases of theatrical development, providing some critical context, and sometimes posing salient questions. He notes the importance of the city's theatre critics in shaping opinion, the consistent pattern of animosity between artistic directors and their boards of directors in all of the city's performing arts groups, and the gradual support of the business community in funding the theatre. He wonders aloud about the changing nature of audiences concomitant with the phenomenon of immigration: "While the stock attitude is to deplore dependence on foreigners, have they perhaps achieved something which native Canadians somehow could not?" (Page 1981, 56).

The second special issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* devoted to British Columbia theatre appeared shortly after an academic conference entitled "Staging the Pacific Province" held in May 1999 at the University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops. Subtitled "A Conference on British Columbia Theatre," this was the first conference devoted entirely to the study of British Columbia theatre. It included playwrights' readings, special guest presentations, panels, and, encouragingly, sixteen academic papers, some of which were published in *Canadian Theatre Review* (no. 101). One article detailed the Royal Engineers' performances on board the *Thames City* as it made its

way to British Columbia in the late 1850s as described in a newspaper published on board: *The Emigrant Soldiers' Gazette and Cape Horn Chronicle.* The writer of this article, Patrick O'Neill (2000), particularly notes the more open and unique nature of their performance structure: both officers and enlisted men performed on the vessel (normally only officers performed plays, this being a mark of their "cultural attainment"), and both groups contributed to the funding of a theatre building in New Westminster, which was constructed less than a year after their arrival. It was "one of the few known subscription theatres sponsored by officers and men together" (13).

In other articles in the journal, Malcolm Page (2000) again provides chatty highlights of professional theatre in Vancouver as it developed from the 1960s to 1999; Ginny Ratsoy (2000) examines the writer-publisher relationships of four playwrights at Vancouver's Talonbooks; Nicole Preston (2000) describes the work of Vancouver's Public Dreams in creating community ceremonies; Barbara Drennan (2000) uses an interview format to describe the experience of attending a stage production at William Head Penitentiary near Victoria; and Graham Forst (2000) gives an overview of the operation of Vancouver's Bard on the Beach company.

The interior of the province is generally ignored in the literature, but when considered, it suggests an intriguing return to the image of the floating stages. Two articles come to mind: one dealing with the Caravan Farm Theatre, near Armstrong (Kirkley 2000), and one concerning a community play staged in Enderby in May 1999 (Little 2000). The Caravan, with its romantic images of Clydesdale horses pulling colourful, circus-like wagons and carefree performers living communally on a farm, has long intrigued audiences and critics alike, no doubt because it approximates a mythic British Columbia theatre – one that is outdoors, homegrown, and performs a polyphony of "counter-culture theatre and lifestyle" (Kirkley 2000, 35). The enduring achievement of this company is based on its "anarchistic ideals"; in sum, it is a reminder of the province's improvisatory, politicized roots in floating stages. Similarly, in Enderby, a "Community Play" in the Colway manner[11] was staged as a large outdoor pageant. In this type of theatre, members of a community, in all their diversity, come together to tell their story. One important purpose was "to help bring two distinct cultures together for work and play" (Little 2000, 56).

[11] In the late 1970s, British playwright Ann Jellicoe founded the Colway Theatre Trust to stage large-scale, community-based productions. For a description by a practitioner, see Oram (1997).

The work, entitled *Not the Way I Heard It...*, was created collectively by numerous groups, what the program described as "our combined communities' oral traditions."

If these rural theatre groups signify a gradual return to the spirit of the floating stages, then what about the theatre buildings themselves? What has been said about our historical tents and temples of the performing arts? Theatre structures may bring British Columbians together physically, but the buildings themselves are rarely studied – a legacy of the colonial silencing of indigenous performance spaces along with the fact that these edifices were often as temporary as they were architecturally mixed. One of the most detailed and colourfully illustrated studies is a booklet on Vancouver's Orpheum Theatre by Doug McCallum (1984). There have actually been four Orpheums; McCallum anecdotally describes each, as well as the restoration of today's theatre, and includes pertinent social and cultural commentary. Designed by the Pantages Theatre circuit's architect, B. Marcus Priteca, who favoured European classical motifs, the structure is not stylistically singular but, rather, is "a melange of architectural forms and decorative styles – a hodgepodge, though not a meaningless one" (11).

The Orpheum was built as a vaudeville variety house, and Priteca's design reflected this. For Vancouver, it addressed a discourse of difference and inferiority: the members of the settler population, displaced from their own origins, their local identity uncertain, enjoyed "the comforting, time-hallowed stability of the old, established world" (11). The recently opened Port Theatre of Nanaimo, on the other hand, designed by Canadian architect Terrence Williams, "takes a homegrown approach," looking outwards to and reflecting the nearby harbour environment. It focuses on a variety of performance styles, many performed by its own community (Weathersby 1999, 27). Clearly, we need more of these studies. We need to recognize that these buildings are key players in the negotiation of place and performance, and that theatre design in the province has frequently structured social interactions that contradict the cultural dynamics of their own community. How often in theatre architecture have audiences been seated according to class in order to consume glittery, imperial confections, in distinct contradiction to the changing postcolonial experience of identity and place?[12]

[12] For a study of Vancouver theatre spaces, contemporary usage, future needs, funding, and audience trends in the mid-1970s, see Baird and Wootten (1977). For a study of Stanley Park's Theatre under the Stars, see Sutherland (1993). For a recent article on the Orpheum, see Davis (2003). Davis's book, *The Orpheum: A Palace of Entertainment,* is forthcoming.

We have barely begun to understand the theatre we have, whether we are talking about the buildings or what goes on inside. This is another reason why longer studies are needed: they offer hope that, with increased breadth of content and deeper application of theory, wider perspectives and essential truths can be articulated. Although, as noted, book-length studies are extremely rare, two have been written about the lives and works of prominent British Columbia playwrights – both residents of the Interior. Gwen Pharis Ringwood established her writing career in Alberta but moved to British Columbia in 1953, settling near Williams Lake. Many of her subsequent writings have local themes and motifs, including plays such as *Drum Song* (Ringwood 1984),[13] which combines aspects of First Nations (Shuswap and Chilcotin) culture and Western theatre (including echoes of ancient Greek) practice, and *The Road Runs North*, in which Billy Barker celebrates the opening of a road through the Cariboo. For Sherrill Grace (2000), this latter play celebrates "a provincial North." Geraldine Anthony's (1981) *Gwen Pharis Ringwood* surveys Ringwood's life and her writings; she notes the importance of the playwright's strong involvement with community, how she helped to invigorate a local theatre group and a coffeehouse, adjudicated, and gave workshops. As Anthony says, she "help[ed] others to realize their creative abilities" (168).

George Ryga was also deeply involved with community, although with more political edge. Residing in Summerland, he was, unlike Ringwood, nonetheless able to make a major impact on major stages in the province and beyond. My biographical and critical study of his work (Hoffman 1995) appeared eight years after his sudden death in 1987. Ukrainian in background, Ryga was an outspoken proponent of what he called "ordinary people," the ethnically and culturally diverse – especially those marginalized by poverty and/or dispossession. In both his fictional and non-fictional writing, he provided a valuable counter-narrative regarding the cultural formation of the province.[14]

Such book-long biographical narratives are valuable of course, but in their attempt at summary description, they tend to seek stable conclusions based on overlays of research data. There is also a resistance to the application of theory. An early attempt to avoid the narrative approach to the writing of BC theatre may be found in

[13] *Drum Song* was first staged at the official opening of the Phoenix Theatre building complex at the University of Victoria in June 1982.

[14] For a brief summary of Ryga's life and works, see Rubin (1996).

Malcolm Page's (1990) enumeration of "Fourteen Propositions" that would characterize a British Columbia theatre. Page examined British Columbia theatre writing from chronological and generic viewpoints, concluding that the full history cannot be written until there is a better pool of data than that gathered in performance calendars. Page briefly acknowledges the ceremonies of Aboriginal peoples but says that they have been largely ignored by White writers. He also comments that very few dramatists have actually written about the province.

Have the critics found a distinct British Columbia drama? The answer is certainly debatable: the current suspicion is that we *do* have a dramatic canon if we can only properly define it.[15] The picture has certainly changed massively since the early 1960s when no British Columbia playwright was included in an anthology entitled *Canada on Stage*, while the editor, an American, cites "the sterility of the native Canadian theatre" and hopes that soon "Canadian playwrights will write more and more about the Canadian way of life" (Richards 1960, x-xi). The mid-1970s saw the publication of *West Coast Plays* (Brissenden 1975). Pamela Hawthorn, director of the New Play Centre, which has nourished local playwrights since its inception in 1970, introduces five new playwrights. She also says that the centre is "dedicated to indigenous drama" (7), although it is not clear what this means; later, she alludes to the formation of the amorphous "Canadian play" (8).

In his hugely popular anthologies, *Modern Canadian Plays,* now published in several editions and used in numerous post-secondary drama courses, Jerry Wasserman (2000; 2001) has done more than anyone to promote the study of British Columbia drama. A half dozen of the playwrights included are British Columbian by birth or residency. Wasserman excels at concise, right-to-the-point introductions; he even has a passion for good plays. In *Twenty Years at Play*, his anthology of plays developed at the New Play Centre, Wasserman (1990) describes his selection process: "these are the plays that have given me the most pleasure, moved me the most" (12). This book contains eight plays and an insider's history of the Centre (he performed in various productions), but it offers no consideration of how the works might in some way constitute a British Columbia drama.

[15] Denis Johnston (1995) avoids the issue by defining drama as inclusive of all aspects of theatre, then gives a brief history of drama/theatre in the province. He stresses that British Columbians are different, that they "situate themselves outside the mainstream of Canadian thought" (171), but he also acknowledges "the richness of the province's dramatic fabric" (180).

Playing the Pacific Province: An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967-2000, was published in 2001. In the introduction, Ratsoy and I "embrace the fact that a homegrown drama exists but is still largely unknown" (Ratsoy and Hoffman 2000, ii). Nonetheless, in selecting seventeen plays, we acknowledged the polyphony of voices; most important, we looked for plays that we felt significantly engaged "the cultural redress underway in a society shedding its colonial past" (v). This is one reason the plays selected range from 1967 to the present: we felt that, during this period, a genuine body of plays emerged that began to self-consciously address aspects of living in postcolonial British Columbia.

Others have entered the discussion as well. At the Kamloops Theatre Conference, Celeste Derksen offered a "meditation" on what it means to her to be a "BCer." This meditation was sparked by her reading of *The Hope Slide,* which was written by British Columbia playwright Joan MacLeod. Derksen did something rare in the annals of writing concerned with British Columbia theatre: she introduced the conceptual thinking of a major theorist, in this case Louis Althusser. Following the theme that the province is peopled by "BC oddballs," she sees herself as "entwined not only with a lived familiarity with BC's geography and history, but also with an attraction to its oddities" (Derksen 2000, 52). The protagonist of the play strongly identifies with the Doukhobors, an "oddball" group conventionally defined by their opposition to the norms of the dominant ideology of the province. Like them, the subjecthoods of both protagonist and Derksen are interpellated as much by their resistance to as by their conformity with the province's dominant ideology. The protagonist in the play (an actor touring the province), the tumbling movement of the Hope slide, the contentious mix of cultures: these, once again, return us to the notion of the floating stages.

Perhaps it is fitting – keeping in mind the early explorers of eighteenth-century British Columbia – that the final word here should go to another immigrant from the British heartland. Richard Lane, formerly a professor at South Bank University in London, now residing in British Columbia, also attended the Kamloops conference. He suggests useful parameters in theorizing a British Columbia theatre, acknowledging that the province is a palimpsest of displaced cultures and is, therefore, subject to analysis by means of contemporary theory. At the same time, however, he believes that

this "layering is not neutral, but held in powerful political tension" (Lane 2000, 8); by this he means that the local configurations are highly complex and that critics must beware of too readily assigning simple solutions, of smoothing over the theoretical complexities of BC theatre. In this way, we argue for a stronger, local application of pertinent theory together with a close analysis of particular moments of theatrical activity, certainly the performative as well as the textual, the aboriginal as well as the immigrant. Wider perspectives of our region, such as those provocatively suggested by Laurie Ricou (2002), are necessary. We need to talk more about the floating stages of Nootka Sound.

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