

*Playing the Pacific Province:  
An Anthology of British Columbia Plays, 1967–2000*

Edited by Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman

Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2001. 520 pp. \$45.00 paper.

JERRY WASSERMAN  
*University of British Columbia*

WHAT IS A BC PLAY? A play set in British Columbia? What if it lacks specific geographical or cultural referents? Does a BC play nevertheless reflect a certain postcolonial, west-of-the-Rockies sensibility, a peculiarly British Columbian state of mind? Must it have been written by a British Columbian? One who was born here? Or lived here when (s)he wrote it? Ginny Ratsoy and James Hoffman wrestle with these questions like Quebeckers at referendum time or sportswriters deciding whether Barbados-born Stephen Ames, usually referred to as “a resident of Calgary,” should be given boldface Canadian status in the golf scores. In Ames’s case the solution is simple: when he scores well, he’s Canadian. In the case of the seventeen plays collected in Ratsoy and Hoffman’s splendid new anthology, the verdict is much the same. Despite their agonized efforts to theorize a descriptive matrix of *pur laine* “uniquely British Columbia drama,” the editors maintain sufficient flexibility to include noteworthy plays and playwrights with any BC connections at all.

In light of recent anthologies from Newfoundland, the Maritimes, Manitoba, and the North, a BC play collection seems necessary just to maintain public relations parity with other provinces and regions. Indeed, one of its valuable functions is to showcase British Columbia’s rich and varied theatrical

history. “Once ‘inordinately depressing,’ the theatre scene in Vancouver is now one of the nation’s most vibrant,” announced a 2002 *Globe and Mail* article.<sup>1</sup> *Playing the Pacific Province* makes clear that vibrant theatre has been a hallmark of the province for thirty-five years, and it does so in an exemplary manner.

In addition to useful bibliographies and production photos for each play, Ratsoy and Hoffman, faculty members at University College of the Cariboo, Kamloops, provide trenchant introductions, many intercut with new interviews: with playwrights John Lazarus, John Gray, Peter Anderson and Phil Savath, Morris Panych, Sally Clark, David Diamond, Joan MacLeod, Betty Quan, Colin Thomas, Marie Clements, and director Pamela Hawthorn. In contextualizing each play the introductions also construct a composite theatrical history of modern British Columbia. They chronicle, for example, the development of theatre for young audiences in relation to Dennis Foon’s *Skin* as well as the emergence of queer theatre in conjunction with Thomas’s *Sex Is My Religion*. They offer histories of the Caravan Theatre with Anderson and Savath’s *Horseplay* and of the Firehall Theatre with Clements’s *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*.

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Gill, “Lotusland in the Limelight,” *Globe and Mail*, 15 June 2002, R9.

The plays themselves are delightfully heterogeneous. A few canonical works anchor the collection: George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, Sharon Pollock's *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Gray's *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, Betty Lambert's *Under the Skin*, and MacLeod's *The Hope Slide* – all but *Billy Bishop* firmly grounded in local history and culture, and all widely produced across Canada. Other major playwrights are represented by lesser known works: Lazarus's clever *Babel Rap*, a staple of student productions; Panych's marvelous first play, *Last Call*; Margaret Hollingsworth's monologue, *Diving*; Sally Clark's bleakly funny *Ten Ways to Abuse an Old Woman*. Perhaps most interesting are the plays that readers might be meeting here for the first time: Beverley Simons's *Crabdance*, once considered a masterpiece but now largely ignored; *Horseplay*, a witty Brechtian script nicely complemented by Caravan Theatre's unique production style; Sherman Snukal's long-running 1980s comedy, *Talking Dirty*; the smart and moving *Sex Is My Religion*. Race and ethnicity loom large in *Rita Joe*, *Komagata Maru*,

and *Skin*; in Diamond's land claims play *NO XYA*, created in collaboration with Gitxan and Wet'suwet'en chiefs; in Quan's *Mother Tongue*, a meditation on language and family; and in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, whose awful story of the deaths of Aboriginal women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside is as fresh as the daily news.

As with all anthologies some obvious candidates for inclusion are missing, among them Tom Cone, Rod Langley, Nicola Cavendish. The most glaring omission is Gwen Pharis Ringwood, British Columbia's pre-eminent playwright until the arrival of George Ryga. Although she did her best work pre-1967, she continued writing plays into the 1980s. And why begin with 1967 anyway? Although reasons are suggested, the date is never clearly justified. Still, seventeen plays is a treasure trove. With all but two of the writers still living, and eight of the plays authored by women, *Playing the Pacific Province* promises continued vitality and diversity in BC theatre for years to come.

### *Faces in the Forest: First Nations Art Created on Living Trees*

Michael D. Blackstock

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. 224 pp.,  
Illus., maps. \$44.95 cloth.

KATHRYN BUNN-MARCUSE  
*University of Washington*

**I**N RECENT YEARS, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Aboriginal cultures has become a common model in museum exhibits and academic volumes. Most often,

this is accomplished through the participation of scholars and artists from varied backgrounds and fields. Rarely is it found in a single-author work. Michael Blackstock's *Faces in the*