

Authorship, Left Modernism, and Communist Power in *Eight Men Speak* A Reflection

Theatrical Women and Party Men

In *Stage Left*, her 1981 memoir of the workers' theatre troupe that she founded in the 1930s, Toby Gordon Ryan provides a circuitous and careful account that avoids, and at times erases, details of the operational relationship of her theatre troupe and the command organs of the underground Communist Party under the leadership of its imprisoned General Secretary, Tim Buck. One of those elisions concerns the play that subsequent commentators have identified as the most significant production of the Workers' Theatre, *Eight Men Speak*.¹ In one of the more curious episodes in her memoir, Toby Gordon Ryan refers to the play as "a high point" and "a great accomplishment," but says almost nothing about it (43). Instead she provides an account of the play by her husband, Oscar Ryan, the instigator and one of the authors of the play, and then includes brief remembrances from two of the other authors, Frank Love and Edward Cecil-Smith (43-46).

At first glance there is nothing remarkable about this moment of deferral in the logic of the book, because it is a scrapbook of recollections and testimonies in which many people are quoted at length. But in this surrogated account of *Eight Men Speak* Toby Gordon Ryan replays one of the critical but unnoticed features of the collision of theatrical modernism and the authority of the Communist Party apparatus, in which the voices of radical women were silenced and their artistic work contained by doctrinal and, invariably, masculinist power. Ryan says nothing of her own involvement in the play as performer, co-director, and theatrical mentor, and barely mentions the fourth co-author, Mildred Goldberg. This complicates the already vexatious

question of authorship of *Eight Men Speak* with what can be hypothesized as a crisis of radical modernism, political instrumentality, and ideological control. It was a crisis that positioned modernist theatrical women in the discipline of the underground Communist Party apparatus, with the result that the radical theatrical innovations of the play were delegitimized, its dramaturgy decomposed into politically useful components and the women who founded the Workers' Theatre either subordinated to the emergent aesthetic disciplinary regime of the Party (as was the case with Toby Gordon Ryan) or squeezed out (as was the case with Jim Watts). These are strong claims, and they go against the apparent evidence of the historical record, including Ryan's autobiographical testimony.

Eight Men Speak has only been published twice: in the original 1934 pamphlet edition by the Progressive Arts Club and in Robin Endres and Richard Wright's 1976 anthology of agitprop plays published by New Hogtown Press. To this day, ownership of the play is obscure, in part because at least one of the authors wrote under a pseudonym (Frank Love, writing as H. Francis), another dropped out of public record (Goldberg), and another left the Communist Party in apparent renunciation (Cecil-Smith).² The fourth, Oscar Ryan, who was closely affiliated with the leadership of the Communist Party long thereafter, authorized the republication and asserted control over performance permissions until his death in 1991.³ Given this history, it is understandable that while the existence of the play may be known to many, it has not been widely read. Nor is its history well known, beyond the fact of its notorious banning.

The first mention of *Eight Men Speak* appeared in brief publicity notices, like this one from the *Toronto Daily Star* on November 25, 1933:

With settings designed by the artists group, Progressive Arts Club, the six act play, *Eight Men Speak*, now in its sixth week of rehearsal, promises to be an unusual dramatic production, the first of its kind written and produced in Canada.

The play, a dramatization of life in Kingston penitentiary, is replete with rapid action, keen humor and powerful dramatic climaxes. Opening in the garden of the warden, the audience is taken into Tim Buck's cell, several courtroom scenes, a newspaper office, a streetcar, a cabaret, a home, a whipping scene and others. The play will be staged on Monday, December 4, at the Standard, Dundas and Spadina. (5)

The 1500 people who turned out for the one and only performance of *Eight Men Speak* at the Standard Theatre were not for the most part there out of a love for theatre, or even for the promised whipping scene. The show was a climactic event in the very busy public campaign launched three

months earlier, in September 1933, by the Canadian Labor Defence League (CLDL), the Canadian section of the International Red Aid, and one of the numerous interlinked organizations mobilized by the underground party. The campaign was a national agitation for the release of Tim Buck and seven other prominent communists and the repeal of the draconian Section 98 of the Criminal Code under which they had been convicted for unlawful association in 1931. During a notorious riot in Kingston Penitentiary in October 1932, shots had been fired into Buck's cell in what appeared to be an assassination attempt by prison guards. In the escalating public debate, the CLDL, under the very public leadership of its General Secretary, the Rev. A.E. Smith, staged meetings and congresses across the country in a massive campaign against Section 98. The riot precipitated a chain of events that would lead to the production and subsequent banning of *Eight Men Speak*, Smith's own sedition trial for remarks made while denouncing the police censorship of the play, a mass campaign that generated over 400,000 signatures and the eventual release of the Eight. What drew the audience, remembered by Oscar Ryan as "tense and exceptionally responsive," to the Standard Theatre was the fact that the play was in effect a co-production by the Workers' Theatre of the Progressive Arts Club and the CLDL leadership, including senior Communist Party members (qtd. in Ryan, *Stage Left* 44). It was a party rally in theatrical disguise, taking place under police surveillance and the open threat of the censorship it triggered. We now know from minutes of the Board of Police Commissioners that the decision to have the play banned had been made while it was still in rehearsal (Toronto Police). That decision was ratified in the interval between the performance and the ban, during which time a transcript and police notes on the people involved landed on the Prime Minister's desk. His secretary wrote to his Toronto political lieutenant that "Mr. Bennett has read the file and thinks that appropriate action should be taken through the Attorney General of the Province to protect society against these attacks" (Millar to Matthews, 2 Jan. 1934).

Eight Men Speak was a critical stage in a series of events that marked the high point of Communist prestige in Canada. It brought onto the stage an avatar—a talismanic embodiment—of the imprisoned leader, and framed him in a scenario that reversed the polarity of the trial that had convicted him. No more than 1500 people saw the play, but because they did, the ensuing judicial actions and activist responses culminated a year later in a mass rally that brought the newly released Tim Buck onto the stage of Maple Leaf Gardens before a crowd of 17,000. Seen in this perspective, *Eight Men Speak*

was the first act in a year-long performance that multiplied popular support for the outlawed Communist Party. Never before or since has a theatrical production played so instrumental a role in a Canadian political crisis.

During the 1931 trial of Tim Buck, Edward Cecil-Smith and Oscar Ryan had sat in the press seats as reporters, Cecil-Smith for the party newspaper *The Worker*, and Ryan as editor of the CLDL magazine, *Labor Defender*. Ryan was also Publicity Director of the CLDL (which undertook the legal defence of the accused), and was involved in the League's "Workers' Jury" that watched the trial and issued a verdict of not guilty in a widely distributed pamphlet. In the social uproar that followed the riot in Kingston Penitentiary and the shots fired into Buck's cell, Ryan proposed another take on the Workers' Jury. This time, with the help of the Workers' Theatre, they would stage a "mock trial" and put the unknown guard who fired the shots on trial in a Workers' Court on the boards of the Standard Theatre, a mainly Yiddish-language playhouse on Spadina Avenue, in the centre of the garment district (Ryan, *Stage Left* 44).

Oscar Ryan's overlapping roles were typical of the Communist Party's underground organization. In 1929 he had been the representative of the Young Communist League on the Party's Political Committee (Polcom, in the telegraphic apparatchik-speak of the day). In that capacity he had been instrumental in the machinations, described by Ian Angus as a coup, that installed a radical left Stalinist faction in the leadership in 1929 (Ryan, *Stage Left* 224). That was the Canadian moment of the international move to the revolutionary militant stance that Stalin called the Third Period of communism, in a declaration of class war. Ryan was a gifted polemicist and writer: a novelist, biographer of Buck, fluent pamphleteer, and later one of the longest-serving drama critics in Canadian newspapers, writing for *The Canadian Tribune* until 1987. His jobs as a reporter and a publicist for two different organizations were in fact one job with two letterheads. His third job from that same office was to organize radical youth in the cultural sphere, and in that capacity he was the instigator of the Progressive Arts Club that sponsored the Workers' Experimental Theatre and the cultural magazine *Masses*, for which he wrote the inaugural editorial.⁴ As a contributor, Ryan sometimes took the pen name Maurice Granite. Insiders would recognize the hardness implied by the name as a tribute to Stalin's "Steel." (This also provides a bridge to his later pseudonym, Martin Stone.) When Ryan spoke in the Progressive Arts Club, he did so with the full force of the central Party leadership.

The Progressive Arts Club (PAC) drew a mixed membership of working-class and student intellectuals, a combination made possible by the fact that the University of Toronto abutted the central district of left radicalism, and was an easy walking distance from the Standard Theatre. Among the students who came to the PAC were Dorothy Livesay, Earl Birney (briefly), Stanley Ryerson, and Jean Watts, a former medical student and émigré from bourgeois wealth who had taken to calling herself Jim. From the other side of the street came Avrom Yanovsky, then at the brink of a distinguished artistic life; Frank Love, a young electrician; and Toby Gordon, a young working-class woman who had recently returned from studying theatre at the left-wing Yiddish theatre company Artef in New York.

Toby Gordon was the only member of the club that had any formal theatre training, and the only one who had direct spectatorial experience of the new modernist practices of revolutionary agitprop. These are crucial facts in the subsequent development of the play because they position her as the theatre specialist with experience of modernist performance and theatrical production. Her time in New York corresponded with the high point of the Workers' Laboratory Theatre, whose name echoed in the troupe she founded in Toronto for the PAC, the Workers' Experimental Theatre. The Workers' Laboratory Theatre, and in particular its mobile agitprop Shock Troupe, was one of the anchors of the workers' theatre movement in the United States. In cooperation with Prolet-Buhne, the émigré German agitprop troupe led by John Bonn (Hans Bohn), the Workers' Laboratory Theatre published and distributed the mimeographed magazine *Workers' Theatre* which functioned as a regulatory mechanism for the movement and spoke with the authority of the cultural organs of the Communist International. Artef was the third leg of this organizational tripod, and while studying there Toby Gordon was in the midst of the radical theatre movement in its heyday. She says very little about it in her memoir, but she brought to the PAC the New York model of highly drilled and uniformed agitprop style and familiarity with its characteristic forms of rapid mobility, mass recitation, iconic theatrical cartoon, and what John Bonn called "the flashlight effect," referring to the use of moving lights and fast blackouts to build dialectical montage sequences on stage (8). As Toby Gordon Ryan describes in her memoir, she returned to Toronto in 1932 determined to do similar work, and it is clear from her memoir and interviews that she was particularly enthralled by the high degree of theatrical discipline that Prolet-Buhne manifested in performance (*Stage Left* 22).

Love, Livesay, and Ryerson were aspiring writers and all three wrote agitprop for the Workers' Experimental Theatre when it was formed in 1932. Although Livesay and Ryerson would both go on to literary fame (in very different ways), Love was the more successful writer of agitprop, perhaps because he was the least invested in literature. As the only proletarian writer in the troupe, he may have been advanced by Oscar Ryan on the basis of the success of his first attempt at agitprop, *Looking Forward*, on the troupe's eastern Ontario tour in the summer of 1932. Love himself states that he was "assigned" to write *Eight Men Speak* by Oscar Ryan (qtd. in Baetz 41), and that when he was stuck, Cecil-Smith offered to help him. Why did Ryan choose Love and not Ryerson or Livesay? Certainly Love's class background gave the project proletarian credibility. By the time of *Eight Men Speak*, Birney had left the group and Livesay had moved to Montreal; even if Livesay had stayed, the poeticized, individualist writing that comes through in her agitprop writing was antithetical to Oscar Ryan's pile-driver style of proletarian prose (which was comparable to the voice of his American counterpart, Mike Gold). The writers who went on to have literary careers seem to have distanced themselves from Oscar Ryan fairly quickly. He may well have been the model for the harsh, dogmatic, and authoritarian proletarian intellectual who demolishes the young protagonist in the dramatic sketch of a meeting of the "Social Problems Club" in Birney's *Down the Long Table* (69-86).

Oscar Ryan and Ed Cecil-Smith provided the ideological leadership and Party oversight of the Progressive Arts Club, but its theatrical creative centre was the alliance of Toby Gordon and Jim Watts. Described by Larry Hannant as a "female gender maverick," Jim Watts was a catalytic figure whose charisma and energy dazzled many who worked with her (161). Her mixture of androgyny, zeal, and creativity made a profound impression on both Toby Gordon and Dorothy Livesay; for both, Watts appears to have modeled a new kind of feminist sexuality and social autonomy (Livesay 21; Ryan, *Stage Left* 33). Her wealth and class background gave her access and cultural power, but she also appears to have had a very forceful character. It was after a heated debate with her that Earle Birney ended his brief experiment with the Communist Party and turned to Trotskyism instead (Davey 9); later he caricatured her savagely as Kay, the sexually predatory Stalinist in *Down the Long Table*. Watts was later one of the few Canadian women to serve in the Spanish Civil War, first as a correspondent for the Communist paper *The Daily Clarion*, and then as a member of the International Brigade, serving

with Norman Bethune's mobile blood transfusion team and a British medical unit. Her career exemplifies the stratum of women's cultural and political work that made the radical left movement possible in the 1930s, and which has been analyzed in detail by Candida Rifkind.

Jim Watts' leadership role as producer and director in the emergent Workers' Experimental Theatre diminished as the activities of the group neared the inner circle of the Party, particularly around *Eight Men Speak*. She continued to be its main source of financial support, and she supplied the automobile that enabled the troupe to achieve the mobility that agitprop requires. As the troupe expanded and developed artistry in the year before the production of *Eight Men Speak*, it quietly dropped the word "experimental" from its name; by the summer of 1932 its programs and posters carried the name "Workers' Theatre." What began as a club of students with modernist artistic leanings and working intellectuals had become something more instrumental, at the historical moment when the member organizations of the Communist International were retreating from the language of proletarian modernism in cultural discourse in favour of the rehabilitated national cultural traditions and realist modes of the emergent Popular Front.⁵

The sleight-of-hand transition from Workers' Experimental Theatre to Workers' Theatre marks the increasing subordination of the troupe to the instrumental interests of the Party, and the literal subordination of artistic women to apparatus men. Although Jim Watts started off as the director of *Eight Men Speak*, her name is excluded from the four listed in the program as directors (Oscar Ryan, Toby Gordon, Cecil-Smith, and Cecil Greenwold, who played the role of the Attorney General). Oscar Ryan states in Toby Gordon Ryan's memoir that "Jim Watts directed the early rehearsals and, when the load became too big, turned over the job to me but continued as assistant" (44).

This is a conveniently simple gloss, which may be true but must be incomplete. Ryan doesn't actually define what he means by too big a load, nor does he explain why he was the one to whom Jim Watts turned, or what he means by "assistant," nor does he explain why her name was not included among those who had participated in the directing of play—which by his own statement she had. Watts was answerable to Ryan, in his capacities as the representative of the CLDL, as a senior Party official to whom ideological deference would have been required, as a co-author of the play, and as witness to the original trial and friend to Buck. It is possible that she found it difficult to sustain directorial authority in rehearsal. The play needed more actors than the Workers' Theatre could provide, and recruited men from the

Unemployed Council. In the meeting of two social worlds—of unemployed working-class men and politically engaged students—it is credible that the gender dynamics made it difficult for Watts to maintain control. (The history of Canadian theatre reveals many examples of male actors refusing the authority of female directors.) Yet other women exerted power on the project: Toby Gordon directed some sequences, and Lillian Cecil-Smith was the stage manager for the production. Watts remained involved in the production as an actor but only in one minor part, as a parody of a bourgeois society woman—in effect, of her own social origins. Whatever the reason for the replacement, the effect remains the same: the theatrically experienced bourgeois radical woman stepped aside for the male working-class revolutionary leader.

Toby Gordon and Jim Watts were the creative and organizational team that had made the Workers' Theatre a success. For them it was a full-time, unpaid activity, but it was the two men employed by Party organizations—Oscar Ryan and Ed Cecil-Smith—who became the public voice of the troupe and who controlled its repertoire. As Publicity Director of the CLDL, Ryan encouraged the troupe and facilitated its touring schedule; as a journalist (although he preferred the term “newspaperman” as more working-class), Cecil-Smith was the troupe's propagandist and public defender.⁶ Both Ryan and Cecil-Smith wrote for the troupe; neither Gordon nor Watts did (or if they did, their work never reached the stage). As the Workers' Theatre became more useful to the Party, and as it became complicit in the cult of personality around Tim Buck, it came under the direct control of (male) Party officials, who superseded the theatrical women who had built it and directed its artistic growth. That the women involved acceded to this is understandable, given the centrality of personal relationships and the grip of the discipline that was a core value in Communist Party culture. The question left is how masculinist disciplinarity and the subordination of theatrically inventive women shaped the modernist theatricality of *Eight Men Speak* in performance.

Coalescent Dramaturgy

Eight Men Speak may be the clearest example in Canada of the brief moment when artistic and political radicalisms aligned in a vision of an artistic practice mobilized by proletarian modernism. It is also one of the earliest North American examples of radical modernist dramaturgy. It predates by almost three years the more famous Living Newspapers of the Federal

Theatre Project in the United States and is roughly contemporary with the Workers' Laboratory Theatre's first version of *Newsboy*, which WLT member Al Saxe described in *New Theatre* (as Workers' Theatre was renamed in 1934) as "a new form" and "[o]ne of the most pliable, dynamic theatre of action forms which has yet appeared" (289). Saxe's theory that the rapid shifting of light, character, and tempo enacted the dialectics of the historical moment—"the feverish tempo of industrialization gone mad"—argued in effect that radical dramaturgy was a discovery of material principles rather than a received archive of genealogical forms (290). This was a position that acknowledged but dispelled the emergent narrative that located the North American workers' theatre practice in a genealogy of European theatrical modernism derived from Vsevolod Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator.

In *Newsboy* and *Eight Men Speak*, we can identify techniques and tropes that virtually all histories of modern theatre ascribe to European revolutionary modernists, particularly Meyerhold and Piscator. Their pioneering work in the 1920s popularized the theatricalist techniques of montage, projections, polyphony, mechanism, and compositional *mise-en-scène*, but they did not invent these techniques; rather, they applied them to the institutional theatre conditions of their respective metropolitan cultures in Moscow and Berlin. In a sense, they transformed spectatorial practices in an established theatre profession by fusing revolutionary politics, radical content, and new theatricalist performance techniques by which *mise-en-scène* became the primary conduit of meaning in performance. These techniques cannot be attributed to any one source because they were synchronic responses to the two major technological developments that produced modernist theatre practice over a generation: electric light and its consequence, cinema. Minute control over stage and house lighting made it possible to use it to develop scenography, and gave playwrights the instruments to break the causality of time and space. Instant blackouts, pinpoint spotlighting, and projection capacity, which all fragmented narrative linearity, had become the composite vocabulary of expressionism by the end of the nineteenth century.

By the time of *Eight Men Speak*, the techniques of the modernist *mise-en-scène* had been well established in New York and London and had circulated in Canada at Hart House Theatre, in the Little Theatre movement, as well as in the "symphonic expressionism" of Herman Voaden (Toby Gordon's high school English teacher).⁷ It was not the suite of techniques as such that leftists identified as radical, but rather their capacity to enact the historical dynamics of working-class experience, and their utility.

Radical theatremakers saw in these techniques a means of release from the scenographic playhouse, and discovered that the dramaturgical forms that had been made possible by electric light could be adapted to new contexts without it. This was the realization that extracted theatrical modernism from the playhouse—the “stationary” stage—and literally mobilized it in the practice of agitprop. In Toronto, the Workers’ Experimental Theatre began as a mobile agitprop troupe and only began to reincorporate its dramaturgy with its electrical sources on the stage with *Eight Men Speak*.

With its innovative structure, narrative use of interruptive theatrical lighting, and quick, dynamic blackout scenes, *Eight Men Speak* is one of the first Canadian examples of the modernist theatre in which the director functions as the author or conductor of the performance text. As a general principle, the play follows a montage structure in which scenes are presented through rhythmic and staging contradictions. Transitions tend to be abrupt and contradictory rather than smooth elisions. The play makes liberal use of blackouts, tightly focused and moving spotlights, gestic props (such as pop-up masks in a jury box), abrupt sound effects (such as the banging of a gavel) and tableaux. The surviving photograph of the final tableau is particularly interesting in this regard because its choreographic arrangement indicates a stylized physicality reminiscent of Soviet formalist performance.⁸

Eight Men Speak is billed as a play in six acts, but the acts are fairly short. Neither the script nor the program makes any mention of an intermission. (The play appeared in print months after the production and cannot be taken as unmediated evidence of what actually transpired on stage.) The play begins satirically, with the corrupt representatives of the governing classes (the prison warden, a reverend, a torch singer) in a garden party as they receive the news of the riot. Caught in the converging gazes of the audience and the Party, the satire initiates the argument of the play by disallowing the moral and political legitimacy of the state. From this initial point of satire—which also serves of course to warm up the house—the play moves through an emotional register that concludes in triumphant anger. When looked at as an orchestration of emotional responses, we find a clear range from self-congratulation (in the Red Scare parody of Act Two, quoted below) to melodramatic sentimentality (when Buck reads a letter from his daughter in his cell), to passionate anger in the careful rhythms of the monologues and mass chants of the imprisoned Eight.

The polyphonic effect is carefully timed and fully exploits contemporary notions of experimental performance—as in the mass recitation in the dark

that begins the second act and the use of lighting to isolate, move, and then unify the dramatic fugue later in that act. In a fugue structure, we are shown a series of blackout scenes, which are then reprised in shorter segments until they are brought together in an intensified choral climax. That moment is short enough to quote in its entirety to demonstrate the theatrical and dramatic effect:

During this scene the spot from the projection room weaves up and down across the entire stage, revealing from right stage to left: Newspaper office, Street Car, Cabaret and the Old Man's Room. The voices are shrill and follow quickly.

EDITOR: Tim Buck riot leader!

MAN IN CABARET: Buck said kill the screws.

WOMAN IN CABARET: Those Russians.

YOUNG MAN IN STREET CAR: Com-yunists!

RADIO: Buck's complicity.

(The next set of voices follows immediately. They are louder and faster than the first set, almost overlapping each other.)

MAN IN CABARET: Buck said kill the screws!

EDITOR: Tim Buck riot leader.

YOUNG MAN IN STREET CAR: Com-yunists!

WOMAN IN CABARET: Those Russians.

RADIO: Buck's complicity.

The next set of voices are shouted simultaneously and are much louder. Each line is repeated three times and the chorus ends with "Buck's complicity".

EDITOR: Tim Buck riot leader.

MAN IN CABARET: Buck said kill the screws!

WOMAN IN CABARET: Those Russians!

YOUNG MAN IN STREET CAR: Com-yunists!

RADIO: Buck's complicity

As the last "Buck's complicity" dies away, the Old Man's voice can be heard.

OLD MAN (very hysterically): Quick, Elizabeth! (16)

At this point, the curtain drops, and when it reopens the scene has shifted to the trial of Tim Buck. Here documentary extracts from the trial record are framed in grotesque parody and what seems to be the first use of puppetry—or actor-puppet interaction—in Canadian political interventionist theatre:

Immediately the Mountie lifts the lid of the Jury Box, up pop SIX JURORS. These six Jurors are all clad in black and are visible only from the waist up. Each Juror wears an identical mask—that of a stodgy, vacant looking face. Each waves white gloves. When the lid is lifted, the six heads pop up with hands lifted. (17)

With scenes like this, *Eight Men Speak* is remarkably similar to the kinds of solutions radical theatre makers would invent in the counter-culture collective creations a generation later. The play demonstrates a clever scenic imagination, yet the production had no trained designers, and a one-night

stand on the stage of the Standard Theatre could permit only quickly built and easily changed set pieces.

As produced, *Eight Men Speak* was an accretion of images and situations that coalesced into dramatic form over the two-month rehearsal period. From the decision to stage a workers' court (as confirmed by both Love and Oscar Ryan), it is easy enough to trace the development of the play into the innovative anthology form that was subsequently critiqued as flawed in the leftist press and which Oscar and Toby Ryan themselves later renounced, but which has attracted the admiration of subsequent generations of critics and theatre activists. Ryan's purpose was utilitarian rather than cultural, but he was open to theatrical experimentation. *Eight Men Speak* began as a collaborative exercise in which the four authors each undertook to write a section of the play. This may seem to account for the play's drastic switches in styles and tone between the sections, but in fact it does not. Oscar Ryan exercised tight control over the process; if the play was "a confusion of styles" leading to "uneven development of the dramatic idea, confusion of conflicts, and lack of political clarity," as judged by the American magazine *New Theatre* (Ferris 30), or "patchy, hit and miss" and "very bad vaudeville," as judged by *The Varsity* (5 Dec. 1933), it was because Ryan had agreed to it. Later in his life, Ryan stated that the play was artless and lacking in unity because the authors were young, inexperienced, and working on a tight deadline.⁹ But retrospectively, from a point where decentred theatricalism has become conventionalized, the play is in fact artful and theatrically clever, and it is not a reach to assume that the authors and the audience of the day thought so as well.

Cecil-Smith notes in his preface to the play that it was developed in the space of two months (which itself establishes an interesting precedent for the normal practice of collective creation in Canada). Love later described the process of authorship:

I was assigned to write the play and there was a girl, Mildred Goldberg, and she wasn't a writer and I don't think she ever became one, but she was well-educated, better than I was. . . . Well, I plotted the play and it was a simple enough plot. We just put the government on trial. Well we worked on it together, but I assigned her to the mass chant, so that was all she had to do with it. I wrote the prosecution, and she wrote the mass chant.

Then Oscar [Ryan] began hollering for the play. He wanted to put it on, you see. And of course, it wasn't ready. And I told him, I didn't know how long it would take because I didn't know whether I could finish it or not. I had never written a play, you know, and so it was all guess work.

But anyway, it happened somehow that Ed Smith said that if I would give it to him he'd help me with it. So, he took it then and he wrote the defense. And as far as I was concerned that was the best part of the play, because that's where he brought out the situation. (qtd. in Baetz 40-41)

We also know that Goldberg wrote the mass recitation that comprises Act Four because it was published under her name in *Masses* (Goldberg). Authorship of the satiric first act is unclear, but its cartoon characterization of the bourgeoisie and the rhythm of its dialogue, with brisk tempo and slangy humour, are very similar to Oscar Ryan's agitprop *Unity*, produced in the previous year. In the writing process, Ryan was the one who looked for places in the script to intensify its theatrical effects; as he later wrote, "We felt it needed intensity, color, conflict, theatricality. We added blackouts and mass recitations and some light humorous elements" (qtd. in Ryan, *Stage Left* 44). Love also noted that Ryan and Cecil-Smith worked together closely (qtd. in Baetz 45). It is reasonable to assume that they wrote the sequences in Act Three that represent the original trial of Tim Buck because they had been in the courtroom, but the brief blackout mass chant of the miners killed by the RCMP at Esteven that interrupts the act bears a strong rhythmic resemblance to Act Four and may have been written by Goldberg.

It is the second act, with its fugue structure and spotlight dramaturgy, that poses a question of authorship. This is the primary point in the play where dramatic textuality is distributed into *mise-en-scène* and the point where all the elements of theatrical production must be conducted and choreographed. The scene is conceived as a theatrical action rather than dramatic narrative and is the one point of the play that calls for skilled direction and theatrical experience. Nothing in the previous work of the Workers' Theatre had required or achieved such a degree of theatrical proficiency. The only members of the troupe who had the theatrical experience of this dramaturgy were Toby Gordon, who had seen it in New York, and Jim Watts, who had travelled in Europe and, according to Toby Gordon, "had a fair knowledge of what was going on" (Ryan, Interview 21). Whether they had a hand in the actual writing of the sequence cannot be determined, but they were the only members of the troupe who had the theatrical experience to shape it. By this time too, Oscar Ryan and Toby Gordon had joined together as life partners, which meant that openly or not, he was in a position to draw on her expertise. The details may never be known, but the fact of Toby Gordon's theatrical training suggests that she played an instrumental role in the collaborative authorship of the *mise-en-scène*.

We know from the program that Toby Gordon—the only professionally trained actor in the cast—did not appear on the stage until her role as the CLDL prosecutor in Act Five, and we know that she was one of the credited directors. This makes it a plausible conclusion that she directed Act Two, which assigns her authorship of the most recognizably modernist sequences of the play—sequences that are more accurately described as built rather than written.

The authorship of *Eight Men Speak* has been described as collective, but the term must be qualified in terms of its later usage to describe the collaborative processes that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (Rifkind 138). The tradition of collective creation that emerged a generation later was built upon an assumption of consensual process, egalitarian decision-making, and distributed authority. The creative process of *Eight Men Speak* was one in which centralized authority assigned tasks, compiled results, and defined objectives. It modelled the decision processes of the Communist Party and adhered to its disciplinary procedures. In that sense, *Eight Men Speak* might be considered a bureau-play, not unlike the plays of the Living Newspaper Unit of the Federal Theatre Project. Given that its components were subject to approval up the hierarchy, we are left with the question of why Oscar Ryan initially approved the decentred “collage” structure that he would later renounce (Ryan, Interview 28).

Ryan may have approved of the play’s unusual structure because his utilitarian purpose was to mount a workers’ rebuttal of the justice system, and to that end the issue of dramaturgical form simply was not important. Tactically, matters of aesthetic principle did not matter in the political moment. It is possible that the authors did not at first see the play as a coherent unified drama at all. The initial idea was to have a workers’ court with a prosecution and a defence. The Workers’ Theatre had been developing its capacity to perform mass recitations, and it would have made good theatrical sense to begin the performance that way. But to make the show into a good night out, it needed to be more than a few short scenes—particularly since the staging of *Eight Men Speak* was a widely advertised climactic event in the CLDL campaign. I agree with Rifkind’s analysis that sees the play as a “modernist staging” combined with “a three-act socialist documentary” (138), but I suggest that it was even less structured than that comment implies. I suspect it coalesced as a play out of its separate components, growing incrementally until it was sufficiently fleshed out to stand as an evening’s entertainment. What began as a paratheatrical mock trial became an agitprop frame that grew a dramatic skin. In that sense,

Eight Men Speak is an archive of performance methods that recapitulates the history of left theatre and takes the audience in stages through parody, agitprop, expressionism, melodrama, and documentary.

It also recapitulates the history of Canadian Stalinism. Noting the absence of feminist consciousness in the play, Rifkind has made the important point that it “stages leftist organizing in ways that document the containment of femininity across multiple ideological positions” (145). The masculinist leadership pathologized the Party as an organic body, gendered by rhetorics of militarism and combat and regulated by the iron discipline that was always a point of revolutionary pride. Women were relegated to support roles, and although some made it to the highest ranks of the Party, they were excluded from operational command. The creative process of *Eight Men Speak* suggests how that pathology worked to suppress women’s radical artistic work. Following the ban on the play, there were several instances in which sections were performed in public. The most significant was the performance of the Workers’ Court scenes at Hygea Hall on January 17, 1934; it was at that meeting that A.E. Smith stated that Prime Minister Bennett had ordered Buck murdered, for which claim he was arrested for sedition. In the aftermath of the ban, the play’s lack of dramaturgical unity was its most useful condition for Ryan and Cecil-Smith, because it could be decomposed and restaged as needed at rallies. They had neither investment nor interest in the play as an aesthetic structure; for them it was a theatrical pamphlet. But as Toby Gordon Ryan describes in her memoir, the women involved had entered into the process with artistic aspirations to create a radical theatre art; and, after the performance of *Eight Men Speak*, began discussions on how to “advance social theatre” (*Stage Left* 47). As they acceded to the discipline that displaced them from creative leadership, they surrendered artistic ambition to the necessities of the mission. We cannot know if that surrender accounts for the elision in Ryan’s memoir, but her silence around the experience of *Eight Men Speak* invites the thought.

That suggestion finds some support in the aftermath of the play. The public aftermath—of the CLDL campaign, the aborted Winnipeg production, the release of the prisoners, and the repeal of Section 98—is well known. The theatrical aftermath is less familiar. The Ryans moved to Winnipeg, and Jim Watts (along with Lon Lonson, who had acted in the play and whom she later married) did her part to advance the art by moving to New York to study at the New Theatre League School under Elia Kazan. When Toby Ryan and Jim Watts rejoined forces in 1935 in Toronto, they founded the Theatre of

Action to take leftist theatre to a level of professionalism in repertoire and production, and, in Toby Gordon Ryan's words, "to enrich and grow" (*Stage Left* 47). It was Watts who secured the troupe's office space and directed its inaugural production of *Waiting for Lefty* in February 1936. Shortly thereafter, however, she left the troupe. Toby Gordon Ryan does not explain why Watts left, but in the summer of 1936 David Pressman arrived from New York to teach at the company's summer school and stayed for the next two years as Theatre of Action's director. He received payment for doing the work that Watts had been doing for no remuneration.

Watt's departure, so soon after studying at a top left-wing theatre school, may have had to do with her uncompromising radicalism, which did not adapt well to the new spirit of ideological compromise and mainstream appeal in the Popular Front. There is evidence of this in a program for an evening of five short plays in March 1936, three of which Watts directed. They were billed as "one-act plays" but at least some of them were in fact Third Period agitprops, including the only Toronto production of *Newsboy*, directed by Watts (Theatre of Action). These were the last of the Communist agitprops staged in Toronto, the last iteration of the radical theatrical modernism that had been superseded by the realist dramaturgy of the Popular Front and Watts' last efforts in the theatre. Her ideological zeal—evidenced by her insistence on producing revolutionary agitprop even after the Party had pointed cultural work to the mainstream—soon found other expressions. Before a year had passed, she was in Spain with press credentials from the *Daily Clarion*.¹⁰

Once again, radical theatrical modernism was displaced by ideological contingency, and once again a radical theatrical woman was replaced by a professional man. This time, however, Toby Gordon Ryan was on the side of the apparatus. Her own work in the Theatre of Action over the next seven years was oriented towards craft, pedagogy, and disciplinary mastery, although she subordinated herself in an organizational rather than creative role. When she reformed the troupe as the Play Actors after the war, she enacted the final stage of the Party refutation of radical modernism by pioneering socialist realism in Toronto.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 I myself am one of the critics who have made that claim, in various writings. This essay is subtitled "A Reflection" because it addresses and builds on analyses that I have developed in a sequence of articles on the history of the Workers' Theatre and the radical left theatre

movements of the 1930s. See my articles “Qualified,” “Performance,” and “Comintern.” This essay draws on material that will be integrated into a critical edition of *Eight Men Speak*, in preparation for University of Ottawa Press as part of the Editing Modernism in Canada series.

- 2 Frank Love was still alive in 1988 when he gave an interview to a University of Guelph student, Elaine Baetz, who used it in her MA thesis on the representation of the working class in the play. At that time he was retired from his career as an electrician. Her quotations from that interview are all that remain of it. Edward Cecil-Smith left the Communist Party under circumstances that remain obscure, after serving as political officer and later commanding officer of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion in the Spanish Civil War. After the Second World War he worked as a managing editor for a publisher of trades magazines.
- 3 In 1983, Popular Projects Society, a popular theatre in Halifax, mounted *Eight Men Speak* with permission from Oscar Ryan. He and Toby Ryan attended the performance and gave a public talk about it. In 2001, I was contacted by a group in Vancouver who wanted background information for their production of *Eight Men Speak*. When I asked how they obtained rights to the play, they informed me that the (rump) Communist Party had given permission. As a Party office had initially proposed the play and supervised it through the CLDL, a case might be made for proprietary right. But at no point in 1933 did the Party claim that right, and the historical continuity between the Communist Party of 1933 and the party that bears that name today is tenuous at best.
- 4 There is no documentary record that Oscar Ryan started the PAC, but the conclusion that he did is reinforced by his leadership role in its various activities, his control over its public voice, and his editorial direction of *Masses*. The Winnipeg PAC was founded in 1934, shortly after the Ryans, by then a couple, relocated there.
- 5 For an analysis of the means by which the international revolutionary theatre movement undertook the ideological shift from militant agitprop to socialist realism, see Filewod, “Qualified.”
- 6 I am indebted to Genevieve Cecil-Smith for sharing family information about Ed Cecil-Smith.
- 7 In his theatre in the Toronto Central High School of Commerce (where Toby Gordon had been one of his students), Herman Voaden explored the techniques of a scenographic modernism that blended lighting, music, spatial mass and shadow, and poetic acting to create what he called a “symphonic expressionism” capable of theatricalizing the Canadian landscape. See Wagner *A Vision* and *The Worlds of Herman Voaden*.
- 8 The single surviving photograph of *Eight Men Speak* in performance has been reproduced in my article “Performance.” It can also be seen online at “Communist Performativities: The Communist Party of Canada 1933-1938” (www.uoguelph.ca/workerstheatre).
- 9 For a discussion of the renunciation of the aesthetic values of the play, see Filewod “Comintern.”
- 10 For an examination of Watt’s activities in Spain, see Hannant.
- 11 I examine the history of radical left theatre in the decade following the war in my article “Performing” and in my book *Committing*. Toby Gordon Ryan’s work in the Workers’ Theatre, Theatre of Action, Toronto Labor Theatre, and Play Actors can be understood as a twenty-five-year continuous project of left theatre work that traces the larger history of ideological and aesthetic shifts in Communist cultural practice. Her long career as a radical theatre worker has to this point been entirely unacknowledged by theatre historians, who have tended to lock her into the historical moment of the 1930s.

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