THE REGIONALISM OF CANADIAN DRAMA

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NEITHER MODERN CANADIAN THEATRE nor modern Canadian dramatic literature is so well established that one can pronounce on them absolutely at this stage of development. However, for the present the term *regional* is the most descriptively useful: in the past decade, the period which has seen the definite rise of a native Canadian theatre at last, regional activity has made the most identifiable and creative contribution to the movement. Of recent playwrights, Reaney, Cook, Tremblay, Murrell and Glass are among those who write from specifically regional observation and experience. Among theatres and theatre companies such names come to mind as Alberta Theatre Projects, Theatre Passe Muraille, Open Circle, Mermaid, the Globe, the St. John's Mummers as examples of the varied regional voices in the Canadian theatre scene.

As a term, *regional* creates bad vibrations in the collective aesthetic psyche — perhaps second only to the term *provincial.* Certainly I do not use the words synonymously, in as much as the latter suggests subjugation to some central cultural influence or control. Nor need regionalism be regarded, as it often is, as narrow, limited, parochial, backward, out-dated or isolationist. In its positive sense regionalism means rooted, indigenous, shaped by a specific social, cultural and physical milieu. It reflects the past as well as the present and at its best absorbs innumerable influences from beyond its borders, particularly as these have bearing on the informing regional perspective.

Thus no denigration need be implied in the suggestion that the late-developing arts of the modern theatre in Canada have little dependence for their vitality on influences radiating from a particular centre. Canadian theatre in the present day exists in pockets, and while some pockets bulge more than others, there is still no *national* theatre movement per se — at least not one to which we can point as our own special equivalent to Broadway, the West End, or other such models of artistic or commercial success. We do have a National Arts Centre in Ottawa, but from the national point of view this functions only as a theatrical cross-roads, insofar as it hosts successful productions mounted in Canadian theatres elsewhere. While the N.A.C.'s recently inaugurated policy of country-wide tours of its own permanent companies has been heralded by some as the long overdue beginning of a genuine national theatre, this is to ignore the real dynamic of theatre growth in this country. Another form of irrelevance to the essential reality of Canadian theatre activity is

the equally spurious ambition for instant internationalism. This is a peculiarly inverted form of provincialism observable in theatre circles with an ambition to develop exportable productions; ironically the process as observed most recently involves preliminary importation. This happened most conspicuously in Edmonton in 1978 with the controversial hiring of Britisher Peter Coe as artistic director of the Citadel. Coe's avowed internationalism in his choice of programme and players in his first season is a simple sign of that theatre's archaic view of the Canadian scene. In one way this recalls that until the late 1940's professionals usually came from outside the country and that Canada's theatres were touring houses to accommodate them. By now, however, with the notable exceptions of Toronto's O'Keefe Centre and the Royal Alexandra, theatres are no longer committed to road-house policies. Touring comes from regions within the country rather than from outside, and normally the mandate of the regional theatres is not the international market (coming or going in either direction).

The tradition of regionalism in Canadian theatre of course originates in the peculiar geographical and cultural conditions of the colonial and post-colonial era. In the days of the predominance of foreign professionals, such native development of theatre as there was depended on the many dedicated groups of amateurs who developed their own community theatres — which they did virtually in every region of the country. Inevitably provincialism predominated in its most parochial terms. This became evident when the Earl Grey Musical and Dramatic Competitions (held between 1907 and 1911) attempted to provide the community groups with a sense of participation in a national theatrical adventure. Clearly from the participator's point of view such an enterprise appealed to regional rather than national pride, whatever the intentions of the organizers. For example, when the Edmonton Amateur Drama Club won the trophy in 1911 with *The Tyranny of Tears*, there was obvious local satisfaction in the triumph over companies from Toronto, Ottawa and London, because Ontario was then the colonial centre for Western Canada. Further, when Albert E. Nash, the lead in the play, also won the best acting award, there was relish in the adjudicator's comment that the part was played with "such intellectual distinction" that he almost suspected Mr. Nash a professional. From Edmonton's point of view this was no mean praise from Hector Charlesworth, a Toronto drama critic of distinction. The most dazzling compliment of all (quoted admiringly by A. B. Watt in a 1949 series of articles "Old Edmonton Theatre Days" in the Edmonton *Journal*) was that this production "coming from a town as far away as Edmonton [the location for the festival that year was Winnipeg's Walker Theatre], where opportunities for studying the best theatrical models are almost non-existent, came as a genuine surprise."

The question of when local boosterism in a given area turns into genuine and self-confident pride in local achievement would be difficult to answer, but as the community theatre movement grew stronger, particularly in the decade following

World War I, the problem of non-existent theatrical models certainly became considerably less acute. Betty Lee, in *Love and Whiskey*, identifies the completion of Hart House at the University of Toronto in 1919 as "the first real sign of the coming amateur boom": its theatre offered over 100 plays between 1921 and 1925 alone. The Winnipeg Community Players, the Vancouver Little Theatre, the Ottawa Drama League, the Edmonton Little Theatre Association were among the many community groups founded in the 1920's. The organization of provincial festivals marked the next phase of development; thus the time was ripe for Lord Bessborough's 1932 invitation of country-wide representatives from the regional amateur groups to meet in Ottawa for discussion of the foundation of the Dominion Drama Festival.

The debate over this development as a positive detriment to the rise of a native Canadian professional theatre still goes on, but certainly, with the decline of the syndicated touring companies in the depression years, a theatre vacuum was filled. Nevertheless in 1933 B. K. Sandwell expressed telling reservations about the organization of a nation-wide amateur movement. He thought that the "impelling motive" of "self-conscious patriotism" was a bad start for the serious development of the dramatic arts in Canada. He also feared that amateurism would not provide proper direction for either writers or performers; this "must be competent, original, experienced, creative," he wrote in *Saturday Night*. "It must also be continuous over a considerable period of time."[1] Hindsight makes it easy to second-guess the specific problems he had in mind: the "pointless socializing" which so disgusted Dora Mavor Moore even back at the time of the Earl Grey competitions, or perhaps the limited aspirations inevitably imposed by the boosterism inherent in competition which in theatre leads to safe choice of play. The failure of the Festival to accommodate itself to experimental theatre was early noted by Laurence Mason in the Toronto *Globe*: there was simply no marking system provided for the proper evaluation of a play such as Herman Voaden's *Rocks*, for example. Years later, in "Ten Years at Play" (*Canadian Literature*, 1969), James Reaney was to note to his dismay and astonishment that for amateur groups he worked with in London, Ontario, the most important rehearsal was the theatrical one — surely a carry-over from the competition era.

On the positive side, E. G. Sterndale Bennett, who was a regional adjudicator for the first festival, postulated at the end of the first season that the Dominion Drama Festival could serve as the foundation stone from "which we might erect a glorious edifice of drama, a National Theatre." But this, he added, need not mean "a centralized plant with its difficulties of maintenance and management but, rather, a brotherhood of effort assisted, guided and encouraged by some parent body."[2] Indeed, the D.D.F. can take a portion of the credit for its part in laying the foundation of certain professional companies within regions where the participating community theatres flourished. In Quebec, Father LeGault's Les

Compagnons de St. Laurent was the seedbed of Jean Gascon's Théâtre du Nouveau Monde established in 1952; in the late 1960's two francophone professional groups unabashedly entered and won most of the D.D.F. awards (Gurik's Le Théâtre de la Mandragore and Pierre Voyer's Les Enfants de Voiture).

In English-speaking Canada, the most significant development of a professional theatre company from amateur roots was the Manitoba Theatre Centre; technically this was an amalgamation of the long-established Winnipeg Little Theatre and a new professional company of one season called Theatre 77 founded by John Hirsch and Tom Hendry. The latter were both Winnipeggers who had served their theatrical apprenticeship in the W.L.T. In his retrospective comments for *Canadian Theatre Review* (Fall 1974), Hirsch spoke of "the excitement that can come from a theatre that grows out of a community" and Tom Hendry paid strong tribute to the role of the W.L.T. in the new theatre centre development. The whole conception was summed up in Hirsch's account of an interview he had given to Ann Henry of the *Winnipeg Tribune* some four years previously:

> I outlined what I wanted to see happen, not only in Winnipeg but in Canada. I said that Winnipeg needs a theatre centre, a regional theatre with a children's theatre attached and a school which would tour regularly. I said that this Centre would be the first in a series of theatres across the country that would eventually be linked.

Interestingly, this is a professional version of Sterndale Bennett's conception of a de-centralized national theatre among the amateur groups. It is extremely important also to note that at the outset M.T.C. was linked to its specific community in several vital ways. As Christopher Dafoe points out in the same *C.T.R.* issue, while production was expanded to make room for first class professionals from outside, the theatre school also expanded to take touring productions to local schools. Also Hirsch recalls how "we constantly went to the community to get extras and good young people for small parts." For several years there was a policy of bringing original material to the stage as well.[3]

Hirsch had a philosophy of community theatre as creating "an organic connection between the audience and what went on stage":

> Even the plays which were not about Winnipeg responded to something close to our audience. Repertoire was always chosen with the community in mind. I didn't mind doing *Arsenic and Old Lace* because I knew the next show would be *Mother Courage*. I knew *The Dybbuk* was not a Canadian play but I also knew that 60 percent of our audience were Jewish and that a lot of Ukrainians in the city would understand this play about peasants, the kind of background from which many of them came.

Unfortunately by the time of this 1974 interview Hirsch had to admit that many of these important connections between the M.T.C. and its audience had begun to fade. He himself left the organization in 1966, although in subsequent years he

was a frequent guest director. After the building of the new large theatre on Market Avenue in 1970, the school did not flourish, and it was closed in 1972; nor did regional touring and theatre workshop develop according to the initial hopes of the founders. In recent years the centre has concentrated more and more on traditional repertoire. Nor have smaller, alternative groups developed out of the M.T.C.'s initial creative energy as had been the hope in earlier days. Nevertheless, the foundation and the development of the whole idea of a regional centre here is of great importance in modern Canadian theatre history and in its initial conception could well stand as a model for newer regional developments elsewhere.[4] Nevertheless the example of M.T.C. is instructive on the negative as well as the positive side: pride of space seems to encourage conservative tastes among many of the now established Canadian regional theatres, and perhaps, too, the ghosts of the old D.D.F. regional boosterism still enforce conventional rather than experimental standards of theatre excellence. Fortunately, however, there are other forms of regional expression in the theatre, offering healthy signs of truly indigenous contemporary development in Canadian drama.

FOR A THEATRE MOVEMENT TO STAY ALIVE and develop, it is necessary to go beyond mere conformity, to initiate rather than to imitate. Therefore it is important to consider the process whereby provincial dependency develops into a genuine regional cultural maturity. Recently even Northrop Frye has given his consent to theories about regionalism: in his Henry Marshall Tory lecture at the University of Alberta, "Reflections of a Canadian Humanist" (October 1978), he spoke of a mature Canadian cultural direction as "a decentralizing movement," finding genuine unity the opposite of conformity, and he emphasized that the more specific the literary material, the more universal its application. The negative term for Frye, however, is "localism," for which he rather curiously chooses the contemporary cultural crisis in Quebec as his prime example. Certainly in the colonial phase of the Canadian theatre movement — the Earl Grey Competition phase, for example — the last thing a group wanted to be accused of was localism. But in modern times the term does have a certain positive thrust, Frye notwithstanding. Indeed one might argue that localism in its contemporary theatrical forms is a demonstrably important phase in the establishment of a mature, decentralized culture.

For example, it is not by accident that in the drama localism is often firmly rooted in various forms of documentary. In many ways Canada is still, as Catharine Parr Traill termed it in 1836, "a matter of fact country." Carl Ballstadt, in his introduction to a collection of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critical essays, *The Search for English-Canadian Literature*, notes that many of the early literary commentators saw great virtue in work which recognized the need to estab-

lish and clarify fact and immediate experience as the basis for literary development in a new country (where the temptation to borrow inappropriately from established traditions from elsewhere was all too strong). In the second half of the twentieth century, in a country with practically no native dramatic tradition of relevance to the modern day, one type of borrowing from European, British and American sources has lent itself both to assimilation and further inventiveness more than any other: European forms of political, epic, and documentary drama — in combination with the American "living newspaper" of the 1930's — have found fruitful soil in several Canadian regions in recent years. In fact, the need to develop such a type of drama in Canada has arisen from the similar cultural conditions which have made documentary theatre popular in regional theatres in Britain. In his book *Post-War British Theatre*, John Elsom has recently noted that

> For the growing regional repertory theatre movement in the 1960's, the local documentaries provided a means of establishing a theatre's identity as part of a town or region, without losing its function as a theatre.[5]

His prime example is Peter Cheeseman's Victoria Theatre at Stoke-on-Trent, where local documentaries have been developed through the careful research of the actors and writers in an effort to focus on working-class themes of this particular community. In regional Britain, local creativity in the theatre has been overshadowed because the transfer and touring systems to and from the West End are the inhibiting factors. The aim of Peter Cheeseman (and those who subsequently took their lead from him, as in Hull, Newcastle and Leeds) was to establish new local theatrical material for new local audiences who otherwise would seldom venture into a theatre at all. In this, of course, he had the model of Joan Littlewood, both in her pre-war Manchester days and the post-war establishment of Theatre Workshop in London's East End.

In Canada, the problem of establishing a theatre's local identity is also a key factor in its success, if, in part, for different reasons. The task is further complicated by the need to establish the identity of the locality itself in dramatic terms. James Reaney pointed to the problem succinctly in his article "Ten Years at Play" when he wrote:

> The tendency in the society in which I lived was to see drama as, first, something somebody else wrote thousands of miles away, and as something that you could evolve physically, as out of a can.[6]

Paul Thompson returned to Canada in 1967 after working with Planchon in France (eventually to become artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille) with the conviction that imported Broadway and West End plays (or Canadian imitations thereof) were bad business in the typical community theatres which

> try to over-reach themselves with something like *There's a Girl in My Soup* or *The Entertainer* where they're trying to deal with people and problems (not to

> mention accents) that they've only encountered in other plays or movies, when there is such rich and satisfying and much more immediate material in the living community around them.[7]

To make the living community yield its own material and to proffer a theatrical interpretation and analysis of this material has been the intent of a number of small theatre groups which came into existence in various regions during the 1970's.

Most groups of this type begin as localist and may choose to stay that way: this is particularly true of those that concentrate primarily on collective creations. The Mummers' Troupe of St. John's is a prime example of a company formed with the explicit intention of creating new audiences for theatre, to be drawn through mutual interest in original material of local appeal. In critical comments about the Mummers it has become almost a commonplace to point out the flawed qualities of their plays and the inexperience of their actors. Certainly they eschew any obvious ideals of slick professionalism, are very much a company in process, and play for the audience they please most and in a manner they believe reaches that particular audience most effectively. In a July 9, 1975, Toronto *Star* interview, the artistic director Chris Brookes said:

> Theatre in Newfoundland is moving away from art-as-art to specific social usefulness. We're very community-development oriented. It's living in Newfoundland, where you're always engaged in a social-cultural emergence. You have to be. You've got to show people themselves before they forget who they are.

The activist bias of the company first emerged in a public way in 1973 when they were soundly condemned on the front page of the Cornerbrook *Western Star* for their show *Gros Mourn*. In this they intruded both on provincial and federal governments during the inauguration of Gros Morne National Park by focussing attention (albeit too late) on the plight of the residents of Sally's Cove, one of the several small coastal communities sacrificed to the project. Break-down or threats to community traditions have been strong motifs in the Mummers' repertory ever since. (This has been a characteristic form of Newfoundland *angst* since the resettlement projects of the late 1950's.) In 1974 the troupe was invited by the workers of the company town of Buchans to create a play which examined the continuing uncertainty of the community's very existence because of the depleting resources of the mines which are its life-line. In Toronto, *Star* critic Urjo Kareda found the play theatrically "unadventurous" in comparison to the socially-oriented collective creations of Passe Muraille. However, Brookes had already forestalled such an attitude (in the 1975 interview) with his remark that

> The people in Buchans thought it important to do . . . because Buchans is symptomatic of a bigger system. At the same time, however, the show is made for Buchans: I'm not interested in saving anyone's soul in Toronto.

From the beginning tours through both the outports and the interior of Newfoundland have been essential to the Mummers' mandate. Eventually they even managed to compete with perennial Newfoundland bingo fervour and are welcomed wherever they go as a voice of the people. In April 1976 Sandra Gwyn wrote in *Saturday Night* of the response in the logging town of Badger to the *I.W.A. Show*, a production which dealt with an important strike there in 1959:

> In the Town Hall, plastered with pink crêpe-paper rosettes left over from the Kinsmen's Dance, I sit down by a pair of loggers and their wives. They're big, impressive people in their fifties, and for quite a while it's hard to tell how they're reacting. When the play gets to the sequences Donna [Butt] worked out, where she plays a striker's wife who changes gradually from a shy homebody to a fiery militant who takes her husband's place on the picket line when he goes to jail, the two women sit bolt upright. Almost before the scene ends, they jump to their feet and start clapping. Then they turn and put their arms around each other.

Still adhering to the philosophy that "Newfoundland frames and motivates us," the Mummers toured *They Club Seals Don't They?* across Canada in 1978; this was a show designed as much for the road as the home audience, presenting as it did the controversial sealing question to the rest of the country from the Newfoundlander's point of view. But even here they refused to compromise their home-based production techniques: even the three-ringed circus they made of the Greenpeace mission, while a rather amateurish, farcical line of attack to those who have more sophisticated views of satire, could be seen as the proper reflection of the situation for the audiences for whom the production was initially intended. When the Mummers travel, they are simply inviting others to be an extended Newfoundland audience for an evening.

The Theatre Passe Muraille conception of touring shows is quite different and with this difference can be seen the possibilities of the wider interest of grass roots or "localist" theatres. This is to say that the collective creations this company began to develop under the artistic directorship of Paul Thompson (appointed in 1971) are intended for varieties of audiences from varieties of locations and walks of life. Their strongest breakthrough in this direction was in September 1972 with their first version of *The Farm Show*. That summer the company had been living and working in the farm community of Clinton, Ontario, with the deliberate intention of creating a play from their experience. The next year they tried a similar project, although of urban orientation, in the decaying mining town of Cobalt; *Under the Greywacke* was the result. In a *Performing Arts Magazine* interview (Winter 1973), Thompson said of these productions:

> we went right to the people in Clinton and Cobalt and made our play out of those people, out of the texture of those people. I keep talking to the actors about texture work because one of the things that is missing in Canadian Theatre in general is an identifiable base for characters. Instead, there's a kind of general base and you

> see too much of what I call movie-acting where, for example, if you want to do a small town character, everybody's trying to be Paul Newman in *Hud* instead of going out to a small town and sitting around in the corner drugstore, finding out how people are there, catching their rhythms and building off that. Part of the problem is we're still . . . well, I guess "culturally imperialized" is the phrase the nationalists use.

The attempt "to bring back a kind of living community portrait or photograph" in these various "essays" of dramatic journalism has stood this company in good stead on the several occasions when they have gone outside their own region; for example, they spent the summer of 1975 working in Saskatchewan to create *The West Show*, consisting of another series of portraits, sketches, historical vignettes through which they made a highly successful attempt to interpret Saskatchewan rural life. They caught its radical spirit in politics and the sturdy independence of mind of its farm people in the face of Saskatchewan's well publicized environmental obstacles. Their work with Rudy Wiebe — specifically for their dramatic adaptation of Sam Reimer's Vietnam call from *The Blue Mountains of China*, led to plans for a full scale play in co-operation with that writer. In April 1977, they presented *Far As the Eye Can See* at Theatre 3 in Edmonton: here they were able to combine their interpretive talents with Wiebe's special knowledge of the Alberta political and social scene. The result was a script which examined specific energy issues of the time from both a localist and regional point of view.

During that first summer in Saskatchewan, Passe Muraille also established a fruitful contact with Andy Tahn's 25th St. House Theatre in Saskatoon. This company, too, was anxious to develop local material for performance. *If You're So Good Why are You in Saskatoon?* was the piquant title of their apprenticeship collective, a work which, with the help of Thompson's troupe, provided them with the essential experience for this kind of theatre — leading in 1977 to their more ambitious and widely toured *Paper Wheat*, a play about the formation of the wheat co-operatives in the West.

Since 1976 Theatre Network, based in Edmonton, has been developing similar collectives and touring them on a smaller scale; its first was *Two Miles Off*, based on the experience of living in Elnora, a small decaying community in the Red Deer area. Network's most successful and most widely toured show is drawn from observation of life in the burgeoning Tar Sands community of Fort McMurray. *Hard Hats and Broken Hearts* attempts to combine the techniques of the collective vignette format with a specific plot line dealing with some of the social problems brought about by the uprooting of people in a changing environment.

The collective has become increasingly popular in the West. In the fall of 1978, Regina's Globe Theatre toured *Number One Hard* in Saskatchewan, a play developed by the company in collaboration with playwright Rex Deverell. In

some ways a challenge to *Paper Wheat*, this work subtitles itself "an investigative documentary on the grain industry" and is a satirical attack against the mismanagement of grain resources. The Globe's experience with this form, however, is of longer standing than that of the other Western companies referred to thus far, and more closely parallels Theatre Passe Muraille's development of the collective documentary play. In the spring of 1971 each theatre presented productions of this type: the Globe opened March 1 in Regina with *Next Year Country* (having first performed it in Prince Albert as a "homecoming" production), a collective compiled by the company in collaboration with writer Carol Bolt, while in April of that year Passe Muraille presented its company-researched play *Doukhobors* in Toronto.

The subsequent history of the Bolt-Globe *Next Year Country* makes an instructive comment on the way in which initial local and regional definitions can prompt broader dramatic patterns. In 1972 Bolt and Theatre Passe Muraille collaborated in a reworking of the script to create *Buffalo Jump* for Toronto performance. A large portion of the revised play deals with the inception of the work camp strike, the organization of the working men in Vancouver and the counter movement of the prime minister's Ottawa office. It also focusses on the human interest of the mass boxcar ride in its various stages before Regina — in the process offering a variety of comic and satiric views of several locales through which the unemployed passed. Caricatures, particularly of R. B. Bennett and Bible Bill Aberhart, are also prominent.

What the play lost in its specifically prairie flavour and historical detail, the new *Buffalo Jump* gained in dramatic shape, particularly through its form of cross-country coverage and its borrowings from agitprop tradition. At the time of the play's publication Carol Bolt said that she was more interested in "myth" than history in any case — here the romantic celebration of the heroic failure of those brought low by the machinations of an autocratic government. In this manner the play also gained something of the energy of the post-October Crisis era, particularly in the guerilla theatre technique of its last scene, as performed in Toronto: instead of staging a full-scale version of the Regina riot of the strikers and the R.C.M.P., a brief scene of violence was quickly terminated by actor policemen who promptly began to hustle an astonished audience out of the theatre door. In 1977 Bolt worked with the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa to add additional Ottawa material to the script, providing for this audience a specifically local perspective by adding scenes which dealt with the large convergence on Ottawa at the time by eastern workers who planned to join the Westerners in their assault on the Bennett government. The expanded localism of the play during its successive performances was an interesting exercise in the dramatic analysis of an historic national issue from a variety of regional points of view.

CLEARLY THEN, LOCALISM AND VARIOUS FORMS of collective creativity are important in themselves to the initiation of indigenous theatre, exemplifying a dynamic relationship integrating actor, director, writer and audience. Yet inasmuch as this type of work energizes new and special interests in the theatre, so does it also provide a proper environment for a new dramatic literature whose chief strength also lies in its regional origins. The point may be illustrated well by reference to certain of the Western regional theatres which have done much to promote the writing of new plays. For example, in the first four years of its existence, Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary, founded by Douglas Riske and Lucille Wagner in 1972, produced only Canadian plays, most of these commissioned from local writers.[8] The practice of engaging a playwright-in-residence has also been fruitful at A.T.P. For two years John Murrell worked in Calgary in this capacity, leading to the production of his *A Great Noise, A Great Light* in 1976, a fictional play of the Aberhart era, and *Waiting for the Parade*, 1977, a nostalgic recollection of the Calgary World War II home front.

Rex Deverell's similar association with the Globe has not only led to his development as one of the best writers of young peoples' plays in Canada (for example, *Next Town Nine Miles*, 1976, and *Superwheels*, 1977); he has also achieved some success with his adult play *Boiler Room Suite*, 1977. That the setting for this semi-Absurd work is the basement of an abandoned Regina hotel is certainly not the play's chief point, yet this does nevertheless indicate that regional roots provide the basis for dramatic exploration of contemporary human conditions in the urban world.[9]

There are also several Western playwrights who have responded more individually to the demands generated by regional theatres. Ken Mitchell, for example, combined his talents with Humphrey and the Dumptrucks for the 1975 premiere of *Cruel Tears* at Persephone Theatre, Saskatoon. This prairie folk opera version of the Othello story was performed the following year at the Habitat Festival in Vancouver and the Olympic festival in Montreal, later to be revived by the Vancouver Arts Club for a cross-Canada tour. Mitchell has also worked at the Globe: in 1972 he adapted Arnold Wesker's *Roots* to a Saskatchewan setting, and in 1978 his play *Davin: The Politician* was premiered there. This last is a lively chronicle of Nicholas Flood Davin, founder of the Regina *Leader* and volatile federal M.P. for the Northwest Territories in the post-Riel era.

Sharon Pollock's *Walsh*, a version of the Sitting Bull-in-Canada incident, was first developed at Theatre Calgary in 1973 under the direction of Harold Baldridge and performed at Stratford in revised form the following summer. Pollock has also worked considerably in Vancouver, there too responding to contemporary regional interests in her plays: *Out Goes You*, 1975, is a satire on B.C. provincial politics, performed at the Vancouver Playhouse. The following season saw the Play-

house production of *The Komagata Maru Incident*, a semi-documentary handling of an ugly World War I racist incident in Vancouver harbour concerning the admission of Sikh immigrants; the general as well as the regional appeal of the work has been demonstrated by subsequent productions elsewhere.

The important point to be made here is that the impetus for the writing of new plays has had to come from the theatres, and where the record for the prairies on the whole is not spectacular, there has been a steady flow of original work in the past ten years or so. M.T.C. has made two important commissions, ten years apart. In Centennial Year Ann Henry was asked for *Lulu Street*; and for M.T.C.'s twentieth anniversary in the 1977-78 season, Joanna Glass was requested to write *The Last Chalice*. These two cases are interesting in different ways. During the formative years of M.T.C., Henry (as theatre critic for the Winnipeg *Tribune*) was a sympathetic observer of the theatre's development. John Hirsch wanted a play about the 1919 Winnipeg general strike and turned to Henry because, in her words:

> My father was one of the platform people, one of the speakers, so I had grown up with stories about it; met people like Woodsworth and others. . . . I had many of my father's speeches. I think it's absolutely essential to know the truth about our history, and you can say things in a play that you can't say otherwise. I was fascinated by the effects on people, the stresses and the strike. It was a marvellous opportunity to write a play.[10]

The result was a happy example of the way local subject matter of deeply embedded interest can attract audiences. The report on the attendance at this play makes its own point about the value of the material: people came who had never been to a theatre before because they were deeply interested in how the strike would be handled. Thus a new playwright emerged out of specific local interest.

The instance of the Joanna Glass play is instructive from an opposite perspective. Glass is an expatriate Canadian (born in Saskatoon) who now lives in Connecticut.[11] Her initial recognition as a playwright has come from the United States: the now well-known pair of one act plays *Canadian Gothic* and *American Modern* were presented first in workshop at the Manhattan Theater Club in 1972. The premiere of *Artichoke* was at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, 1975. Between these years and since, however, these plays have been given several performances in Canada. Their specific appeal (with the obvious exception of *American Modern*) is in their sensitive rendering of prairie experience. Yet the M.T.C. invitation was the first time Glass was approached to write a play for a major staging in a Canadian theatre.

Clearly the regional theatres are not always as sensitive to the potential for new plays as they should be, nor are they always responsive to already established work. The instance of Herschel Hardin is illustrative in the West, with specific reference

to his play *The Great Wave of Civilization*. Written in 1962, this quite powerful Epic theatre analysis of the winning of the West through the heartless abuse of the Indian peoples won a Centennial prize in Alberta five years later, but waited another nine years for its premiere performance at the Lennoxville Festival. It has never had a prairie performance, although Hardin's later play *Esker Mike and His Wife Agiluk*, premiered at Factory Lab Theatre, Toronto, in 1971, was mounted at M.T.C. in the 1973-74 season. In the past two or three years some theatres are making concerted efforts to locate more plays and playwrights. In Edmonton, for example, The Playwrights Unit, jointly sponsored by Theatre 3 and Northern Light, provides a playreading service and offers professional workshops of half a dozen plays a year. Their efforts have led to several full scale productions in prairie theatres.[12]

It will be observed that much of the regional drama referred to in this discussion has either historical, political, or sociological bias. There is a view that such interests merely serve a playwright in his apprenticeship (and perhaps Canadian drama in *its* apprenticeship) rather than in his maturity. This would be to say that the inexperienced dramatist lacks the confidence to write out of the fullness of his personal experience and therefore must, at first, take refuge behind issues and fact. It is certainly true that a playwright's work in collectives (and these frequently fall into the category of documentary) can serve as an excellent training in writing for the theatre — although equally well an experienced playwright can help the actors and director better realize their intentions on the stage. But the truly important considerations about contemporary Canadian regional drama are that, first, regional drama establishes the validity of a specific milieu as the subject for dramatic interpretation; second that it draws its strength from the audience interest it thereby generates; and third and equally important, that it feels free to experiment in styles and stagings in order to communicate its particular vision in its own particular way. Indeed there is a positive advantage in the very lateness of the development of a Canadian dramatic literature. No Canadian playwright need feel the constraints of the well-made tradition and its modern sit-com variations.

Further, while the evolutionary theory of cultural development (that we move *from* history to individuality, for example, or *from* either nationalistic or regionalist self-consciousness to a more cosmopolitan artistic realization) may have its attractions, its desirability and even its validity are open to question. James Reaney, the best of the Canadian regional playwrights, and therefore quite possibly the best of all English-speaking playwrights in Canada up to now, has demonstrated in his Donnelly trilogy that regional historical detail can be animated by a gifted dramatic imagination. The universals of personality or individuality are surely best contained within the fabric of a specifically realized time and place. The imagination must soar if that is its gift, but the best chance for its success lies in its continuing reinforcement of that rootedness which makes flight possible.

NOTES

[1] Quoted by Lee in *Love and Whiskey* (Toronto, 1973), p. 113.

[2] Ibid., p. 120.

[3] Hendry lists *Desperate Journey*, by Mort Forer; *Look Ahead and All About Us* by Len Petersen; *A Very Close Family*, Bernard Slade; *Names and Nicknames*, James Reaney; and two Canadian adaptations by Betty Jane Wylie: *An Enemy of the People* and *Georges Dandin*.

[4] While the country does now have theatres in almost every major centre, this does not constitute a true network which the term "decentralized national theatre" implies. Among such organizations as the Neptune, Theatre New Brunswick, Toronto Arts Productions or Vancouver Playhouse, one may see one or two of the early aims of M.T.C. taking root, but none exemplifies all of them.

[5] (London, 1976), p. 102.

[6] Rpt. in *Dramatists in Canada*, ed. W. H. New (Vancouver: Univ. of B.C. Press, 1972), p. 72.

[7] *Performing Arts Magazine* (Winter 1973), p. 31.

[8] Playwright Paddy Campbell and composer William Skolnik have collaborated in several musical plays: *Hoarse Muse*, 1974; *Under the Arch*, 1975 (which evolved from the company's first production, *The History Show*); *Passengers*, 1978. Other playwrights who have provided regional material for this stage include Bonnie Le May, *Roundhouse*, 1975; Jan Truss, *A Very Small Rebellion*, 1974; and Claudia Gibson, *We Don't Need Another Widow McEachren*, 1973.

[9] Rod Langley also worked as a writer with the Globe: *Tales of a Prairie Drifter*, 1973; *Bethune*, 1974, a joint commission with the Centaur, Montreal. The choice of subject as well as the co-sponsorship can be seen as another way in which regional interests work in Canada: Saskatchewan's political radicalism and Montreal's belated local pride in Bethune combined suitably to create a play of general interest but from a specifically regional impetus.

[10] Sarah Yates, *The First Twenty Years* (Winnipeg, 1978), p. 15.

[11] She studied acting with Betty Mitchell in Calgary in 1955 and obtained an Alberta Arts Council scholarship to work further at the Pasadena Playhouse.

[12] These include Frank Moher's *Stage Falls*, Mary Baldridge's *The Mary Shelley Play*, and Gordon Pengilly's *Songs for Believers*, all in the 1978 season.