

GROWING PAINS

Toronto Theatre in the 1970's

Robert Wallace

(for Brenda Donohue)

"The geography of the situation becomes so dense, so rich with possible paths, that the instinctive sense of direction fails; and questions of destination are rapidly replaced by the concerns of survival." — MARTIN KINCH

"In this country there's an appetite to put buildings up, to equate culture with cupolas and glass palaces." — PAUL BETTIS

IN AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED in *Canadian Theatre Review*, no. 21, in 1979, Ken Gass, founder of Toronto's Factory Theatre Lab, concludes:

Toronto may be a bustling, chic metropolis with abundant resources and an active theatre industry, but it is also thoroughly conservative and not the most conducive environment for serious theatre work.

Gass's opinion of Toronto theatre at the end of the seventies is not as important as the fact he takes for granted: in just ten years, an "active theatre industry" has emerged where little was before. The 1979/80 edition of the *Canadian Theatre Checklist* contains over fifty listings of theatre buildings and companies in the Toronto area, few of which existed in 1969.¹ *City Nights*, a weekly entertainment guide circulated throughout the city, offers a constantly changing roster of theatrical events. At least one review of a new play, cabaret act, or theatre piece can be found in the entertainment sections of Toronto's daily newspapers. Commercial ticket agencies with offices in the suburbs are thriving while pre-curtain box-office queues are customary at many downtown theatres. Dinner theatres, cabarets and revue houses flourish across the city, not to mention the taverns, bars and pubs featuring a wide variety of acts and complementing the legitimate theatres. For better or for worse, theatre has become business in Toronto, the inevitable result of an artistic evolution in which success is equated with an ever-widening audience.

Toronto theatre has also become real estate. Theatre Passe Muraille, Tarragon Theatre, The Factory Theatre Lab, and Toronto Free Theatre — the cornerstones of new theatre in the city over the last decade — have all acquired build-

ings, mortgages and renovation bills. Modest beginnings such as Theatre Passe Muraille's basement workshop in Rochdale College in 1969 have grown to two- and three-stage enterprises — the theatre "complex" replete with bar, restaurant, and office space, projected if not already built. The "two-stage" season of the regional theatre is now an accepted feature of many Toronto theatres, as are subscription series, preview performances, press kits and, in the case of Adelaide Court, the highly successful home of Open Circle Theatre, Theatre du p'tit Bonheur and New Theatre, dinner packages and twelve-dollar seats. That a dissatisfaction with the regional theatre's "balanced" seasons of proven plays was a major impetus to the rise of theatres such as these seems to have been forgotten. And the premise that "theatre is event, not architecture,"² an attitude which united artists as diverse as Passe Muraille's Paul Thompson and Tarragon's Bill Glassco in the early seventies, appears to have been definitely revised.

The changes — some would say compromises — that have accompanied the phenomenal growth of Toronto theatre during the Seventies have elicited considerable criticism from outside the theatre community as well as substantial self-analysis from within.³ Central to most of the criticism is a disillusionment with the various theatres' acknowledged shift from "alternate" to "establishment" status. The reasons for this shift are both artistic and financial, and worth considering as many Toronto theatres begin to pursue commercial independence. The results of the shift are less clear, being part of the transition which is still going on. That the shift is well developed needs little debate. Gass in his article in *CTR* (no. 21) suggests that the term "alternate" is already archaic and can only be appreciated in its historical context. A legitimate discussion of Toronto theatre demands "removing the label of Alternate from what is now the mainstream." Gass's idea echoes a statement by Martin Kinch who, as Artistic Director of Toronto Free Theatre, said two years earlier, "There's a need for us to become an institution. At least then people will get out of the habit of calling us a small theatre or alternate theatre or any of those condescending terms."⁴ Bill Glassco, a pioneer of Toronto's "all-Canadian" theatrical stance, presumably agrees: an article in the *Toronto Star*, March 1979, begins with his statement, "We're trying to create a Broadway," and concludes with "I know down to my toes that I want to do a Rogers and Hart Musical, but I don't know when the time is right."⁵

Clearly, the time is fast approaching. January 1980 saw six musicals premiere in Toronto's "new" theatres. Although two of these — George F. Walker's *Rumours of Our Death* at the Factory Theatre Lab and Michael Ondaatje's *Coming through Slaughter* at Theatre Passe Muraille — continue the "serious theatre work" traditional to their respective theatres, the others amount to entertaining diversions of little challenge or consequence. Their emergence and, more importantly, their success, suggests that a major cause of the shift from an "alternate" aesthetic that typified Toronto theatre during the late Seventies will con-

tinue to affect it during the Eighties. Discussion of this cause is best begun by considering Bill Glassco, who as early as 1974 recognized the need to re-evaluate his theatre's artistic policy in light of financial pressure and audience response. After four short seasons, Tarragon Theatre had been acclaimed "the most alert and influential in Canada,"⁶ "the brightest and most professional showcase for new Canadian plays."⁷ Such acceptance had its negative effects, however, as Glassco explained when he decided to close the theatre temporarily in 1975:

Suddenly, you see, we had four box-office winners: French, Freeman, Reaney and Tremblay. We had won this special reputation for delivering a first-rate show and the more we used our increasingly successful playwright, the more intolerant we all — the audience and the theatre — became of experiment and failure.⁸

The freedom to experiment and to fail had been central to the development of new Canadian plays and to the search for Canadian themes and talents that contributed to the alternate aesthetic. Gass, in fact, cites "the development of new theatrical experiences, particularly in terms of new Canadian plays, which the regional theatre system had markedly discouraged" as the prime artistic aim of the alternate movement.⁹ That "new experiences" should become intolerable so quickly says less about the power of the new plays than the immensity of the need that they filled. David French's *Leaving Home* was hailed as a minor masterpiece not because of its theatrical daring, which is all but non-existent, but because of the identification it allowed the audience with its characters. It, like David Freeman's *Creeps*, Michel Tremblay's *Forever Yours*, *Marie-Lou*, and James Reaney's trilogy about the Donnellys, more than fulfilled Tarragon's original intention "to produce new plays of our own culture as well as possible, to nurture Canadian playwrighting talent, to act as a testing ground and as a source of new plays from which other Canadian theatres could draw";¹⁰ but that it should be viewed as the prototype for new Canadian drama was more than unfortunate — it was debilitating, given the demand it created in the audience. The problem, quickly labelled "the hit syndrome," would have long-lasting effects, the nature of which Jane Glassco, Tarragon's publicist, suggested in December 1974:

We've been programmed into becoming an institution. You don't gamble anymore when you're programmed. . . . If a new David Freeman came along with a play that called for a cast of eight or nine, we couldn't do it. We couldn't take the risk on a new play, but we'd have to wait until his second or third. . . .¹¹

As Glassco was to acknowledge in 1977, this problem didn't go away:

In season one I did Canadian plays, because we had to do Canadian; and I wasn't thinking of a big audience then because there wasn't any audience at all; and when I didn't have that many dollars, I wasn't risking losing many dollars. It all made sense then, but it would be folly now.¹²

Tarragon's 1977 season suggested the sobering effects of Glassco's new prag-

matism and marked a significant change in the theatre's artistic direction. Stating "we're at a stage where it's important that we test ourselves against established work from the rest of the world,"¹³ Glassco included in his line-up three adaptations of world classics, Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Frank Wedekind's *Lulu*, and Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. This trend continued the next year with productions of Lillian Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* and Racine's *Bajazet*. The 1978/79 season also introduced another departure from Tarragon's original artistic policy: the inclusion of plays, productions, and directors from other Canadian theatres — in this case, John Gray's *18 Wheels*, which had premiered at Passe Muraille the previous year.¹⁴ Explaining this development, Glassco might have been summarizing what appears to be his present attitude: "I realize now the object is to fill your season with the best possible shows."¹⁵ These, of course, are not necessarily Canadian nor are they likely to be untried scripts by unknown authors — at least not very often. Although both the 1978/79 and the current seasons contain new works by Canadian playwrights, these "risks" are balanced by shows that have proven themselves elsewhere. In short, the Tarragon season now resembles that of Toronto Arts Productions, the regional theatre whose consistently formulaic offerings at the St. Lawrence Centre invariably include a modern classic, a contemporary British or American play, a period drama in modern dress and a Canadian play, rarely new.

CHARTING THE CHANGES THAT TARRAGON has made during its rise to national acclaim is useful only insofar as it establishes a historical context from which to view the current situation of Toronto theatre. Although Bill Glassco is no longer fostering new Canadian plays and developing new playwrights to the degree he once did, his commitment to Canadian drama, like his contributions, remains integral to his work. "What's at stake now is how can our theatre remain unique and grow at the same time."¹⁶ His question is crucial and indicates the very real dilemma of Toronto theatres much more vulnerable than Tarragon to the vagaries of commercial expediency. Discussing Tarragon's problems with success does little to explain the financial crisis that all these theatres must continue to face; indeed, a full understanding of Tarragon's policy changes demands the recognition that its funding structure has also altered drastically during the last decade. Mallory Gilbert, Tarragon's administrator in 1977, explained that "cost-per-production is two or three times higher now than it was when we began six years ago."¹⁷ Ironically, this is partly a result of Tarragon's success as well. In October 1974, for example, Actors Equity found it necessary to reclassify the theatre from a studio operation because it had grossed more than \$3,200 a week. This reclassification required the theatre to raise actors' salaries to \$130 a week; this, in turn, broke the projected budget and necessitated corporate fund-raising

when the Canada Council refused to enlarge its grant to compensate for the unexpected deficit. The scaling of Equity rates to the size and solvency of a theatre is now common practice and has resulted in higher costs for Toronto theatres above and beyond ordinary inflation. Government grants, on the other hand, have not risen comparatively; rather, the theatres have been pressured by subsidizing bodies to increase their box-office and pursue private grants. Although the arts councils correctly maintain that this allows them to adjudicate theatres according to their community support, it also makes the theatres dependent on their community appeal. Marketing a theatrical product that attracts the widest possible audience is more appropriate to television than indigenous theatre; yet this is what the councils demand. In such a situation, the freedom to experiment and develop new talent becomes increasingly restricted.

Given such a climate, the increased commercialization of Toronto theatre is hardly as surprising as the fact that experimentation continues to exist to a fairly healthy degree. And that most theatre being produced in Toronto at the beginning of the eighties continues to be Canadian, albeit "safe," suggests the inestimable impact of the alternate movement. Although Ken Gass feels he must plan his future theatre work elsewhere,¹⁸ many other artists are now able to plan their careers at home. As Glassco says: "There's so much work for the better actors in this country. You can't hold on to them even for a tour. . . . They're already in the situation of picking and choosing what they want to do. And it is on them that the new Canadian theatre is focusing. . . . When I talk of making our theatre strong, I mean making actors survive and grow."¹⁹ Although Glassco's remarks are overly optimistic — many young actors still move south in search of more regular work — they reflect a real increase in opportunities for actors, directors, playwrights, and designers who have developed reputations within the city. Actors such as R. H. Thompson, Fiona Reid, Clare Coulter, and Brent Carver now receive "star billing" in production publicity. Plays by local playwrights as diverse as Larry Fineberg, Erika Ritter and George F. Walker do healthy business regardless of reviews. Innovative directors the like of Paul Bettis, Pam Brighton, and Eric Steiner often attract more publicity than their productions. And designers such as Michael Eagen and Mary Kerr need to travel less to win contracts and recognition. What has yet to emerge is a transfer house that will allow popular productions by such artists to move from their original theatres for a longer run. The emergence of commercial producers like Marlene Smith and David Pacquet, however, suggests that one might soon be found; Smith's successful run of Tarragon's production of David French's *Jitters* at Toronto Workshop Productions in 1979 augurs well for the future. And as extensions of popular plays such as Pam Gems' *Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi* or the Miller/Witkin musical *Eight to the Bar* become more common, Glassco's pursuit of "Broadway North" proves more feasible.

Given the current situation, Glassco's switch in focus from the playwright to the actor is also understandable: traditionally, the theatre audience is most interested in the performer. Ironically, this switch is consistent with one of the avowed principles of the alternate aesthetic, at least as it was defined by Theatre Passe Muraille, the other Toronto theatre that has captured the most national interest besides Tarragon. Jim Garrard, founder of Passe Muraille, outlined this principle in one of the theatre's first manifestos in 1969:

The renaissance of the theatre as experience, as event, demands that contact be made (i) among the actors, who must work together as a continuing ensemble; (ii) between the actors and those individuals termed 'the audience'; and (iii), because theatre is a human event, between people and people.²⁰

The most appropriate name for such a theatre, Garrard explained, would be "theatre without walls" — hence Theatre Passe Muraille. Although Passe Muraille acquired its own theatre in 1976, its interest in "a theatre free of distinctions between actor and spectator, between 'inside' and 'outside,' between drama as one art form, music as another and dancing as yet another," survived the move; indeed, Garrard's demand for a theatre without walls should be regarded as a figurative, not a literal, direction. A theatre "whose main reason for being is the link between it and its audience" can exist anywhere, as Passe Muraille's utilization of playing spaces as unconventional as haylofts, auction rings, church basements and union halls makes clear. What is important is that the theatre "find new ways to reach people and use people . . . that every project must be approached freshly and that the methods must be rediscovered." Passe Muraille's constant search for the "authentic" and "alive" experience for both audience and performers is responsible for its unique position in Toronto theatre today; of all the Canadian theatre groups that participated in the Festival of Underground Theatre in August 1970 — an event which is often cited as the beginning of the Toronto alternate theatre²¹ — only Passe Muraille has been able to integrate its alternate aesthetic with a viable commercial policy. Although this has not been achieved without compromise, the theatre still maintains many of its original aims; doing so, it persists as a nucleus for much of the city's experimental theatre.

Most of the credit for this must go to Paul Thompson who, as Artistic Director, assumed Garrard's position in 1971 after it had fallen briefly to Martin Kinch. Although Thompson has allowed the theatre to develop in the multi-directional ways appropriate to its compass-like logo, he has persistently influenced his co-workers with an anti-establishment approach to both the making and marketing of theatre that is still remarkably consistent with Garrard's original intentions. In an interview with the now-defunct *Toronto Telegram* in 1969, Garrard made these abundantly clear: he is worth quoting at length both to recognize the manner in which Toronto theatre has altered in ten years and to realize the ways in which Theatre Passe Muraille has not:

Theatre must be indigenous. It must be organic. . . . The professional artist is ruining theatre. They think theatre takes place in glass cages. They think theatre is real estate so they build big amphitheatres but they have no one to fill them. We don't need a St. Lawrence Centre. Not if George Luscombe [of Toronto Workshop Productions] can't pay his mortgage. It's important to get out of the theatre. Out into the streets, into schools and parks, into prisons, and apartment buildings. . . . We need a guerilla theatre front, to involve people in real warm confrontations. Theatre in the subways, get a truck and do theatre in small towns, real circusy, grab people in the streets. . . . I'd like to make theatre as popular as bowling. People say theatre is dead but in Nathan Phillips Square we had an audience of 300 standing around on those ramps watching while we did exercises. If we could build fourteen to fifteen people who work well together, who have a dialogue, we could probably turn a lot of people on to theatre. The ensemble becomes the resource.²²

Although Garrard's "living theatre" rhetoric now may seem embarrassing to some, its relevance to Theatre Passe Muraille's success can't be ignored. The basis of Passe Muraille's reputation is its use and refinement of "collective creation," the process by which a group of people — usually the cast — collaborates to develop a play through research and improvisation. The development of an ensemble that could "dialogue" about their experience of an event, place, or person was central to such early Passe Muraille hits as *Doukhobors*, *The Farm Show*, *1837: The Farmer's Revolt*, and *I Love You, Baby Blue*; here, actors such as Miles Potter, Janet Amos, David Fox, and Anne Anglin were allowed (required?) to transform personal experience into scenes that were then juxtaposed to become an episodic play. In an interview with *Open Letter* in 1973, Thompson explained his use of the actor as resource in such productions:

Part of the concept of doing 'collective' plays is saying that the actor has more to give than often is required or demanded of him in traditional plays. I think, you know, he should be more than a puppet. He's got a head, he's got his observations and he's quite as capable as anybody else of making a statement or passing on observations. In the kind of work we're doing, we like the actor to really put some of himself in the play. We also work through the skills an actor has. If an actor could yodel, for example, then I'd really like to put his yodel into a play.²³

The discovery and utilization of the actor's skills within the creative process continues to result in some of Passe Muraille's best productions and to make Paul Thompson a magnet for actors from all across the country. That some of these, like Ted Johns or Linda Griffiths, unearth a genuine talent for writing while working with him, is an added dividend. Although Thompson dismisses his function in the collective process as that of "gluepot," both his critics and collaborators are quick to proclaim his centrality. Reviewing Griffiths' *Maggie and Pierre*, for example, one Toronto critic wrote, "Much of the show's charm comes from the stagecraft [Linda Griffiths] has developed with director Paul Thompson, her long-time mentor."²⁴ That Thompson's contribution has been prolific as well as consistent

can be recognized by glancing at the *Members Catalogue* of the Canadian Guild of Playwrights: twenty-two collective creations are attributed to Passe Muraille up to 1979 and, as the editor states, "Paul Thompson, as scenarist and director, centralized the shaping of the Collective Creation into a staged play production, by himself where no playwright or other name is mentioned, and as a shared function where a name is mentioned other than the collective."²⁵

ALTHOUGH IT WOULD BE PRESUMPTUOUS to trace the national interest in collective creation²⁶ to Passe Muraille, the theatre's popularizing of the form within Ontario can't be denied. In all fairness, George Luscombe at Toronto Workshop Productions had been preparing Toronto audiences for the revue form most typical of the collective product throughout the Sixties: but Luscombe's development of productions like *Hey Rube!* and *Chicago Seventy*, heavily influenced by his apprenticeship at Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop in England, always bore the imprint of Luscombe's own particular vision and style. Thompson's work is more varied, marked more by its eclecticism than by any consistent visual or presentational form. This is partly due to the fact that he, more than Luscombe, allows his actors free reign and that he works with writers the strength of Carol Bolt, Rudy Wiebe, Rick Salutin, and Betty Jane Wylie. The Passe Muraille collective creation, rather than becoming predictably stylized, changes according to the interests and energies of its various creators. As a result, the shows continue to attract both old and new patrons, assisted by Thompson's aggressive attempts to reach people for whom theatre is a new experience. Passe Muraille's decision to decline an offer to take *The Farm Show* to New York in 1974 in favour of touring Ontario farm communities suggests the degree to which Thompson was adhering to one of Garrard's original demands, namely that the theatre "get a truck and do theatre in small towns." Thompson's subsequent use of various spaces throughout the city for the staging of plays — most notable in *The Immigrants*, a play devised for Italian, Greek, and Portuguese community clubs — although not always successful, reveals another, namely that "the theatre find new ways to reach people." As Thompson said in 1973, "I'm interested in discovering the audience. I think the really interesting people are the ones who don't go to theatres."²⁷

Thompson's fear of becoming "locked in" or creatively restricted by any one dramatic form or theatrical style was well developed as early as 1972. A statement he made that year, as well as being prophetic of the current situation, reveals his awareness of "the hit syndrome" and suggests that an adherence to social and artistic integrity is still commercially viable:

Once you have one show that works you start looking for another. The Factory has had three light comedies in a row. Within a year four or five *Brussels Sprouts* will

be offered to it. Canada's answer to Neil Simon! Tarragon Theatre and Factory are going to have to turn somewhere. If you become dependent on a box office you become dependent on the success of your shows. Or dependent on subsidization. That's not the point of Passe Muraille. . . . If you're going to work that way, you work towards acceptance. The Passe Muraille is like an art gallery — it changes with each exhibition.²⁸

Although Passe Muraille's production history is not without shows that pander to commercial tastes and expectations (as, for example, *I Love You, Baby Blue 2* — a blatantly empty attempt to exploit the name and publicity of their earlier success), it demonstrates a consistent avoidance of revivals and extensions that suggests the theatre's adherence to more than commercial aims. Money, of course, has always been as much a problem in Toronto as anywhere else. Indeed, *I Love You, Baby Blue* was allowed to run for months to capitalize on its attempted closure by the Toronto morality squad and the interest that ensued. The show was accused of "sexploitation" and, because of its extended run, is sometimes used to argue that Passe Muraille would "go commercial" if it only could. Such arguments usually fail to recall that *Futz*, Passe Muraille's very first production in 1969, also was invaded by the Toronto Morality Squad: "daring" and "controversial" are consistently applicable to this theatre even as "obscene" is not. And, as Thompson explained in an interview with the *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Baby Blue* was quite in keeping with the theatre's policy:

Much of the work at Passe Muraille is built upon a kind of idealism. What ties people together is the exploration of a theme and the challenge of exploring that theme in a theatrical way. For *I Love You, Baby Blue* we took the techniques of *The Farm Show* and tried to apply them to the sexual fascination of a big city. We had a feeling that if it worked it would be a hit and a lot of people would come and see it — but *our* definition of a hit did not remotely anticipate the potential of *Baby Blue*. As an intense theatrical experience *1837: The Farmer's Revolt* was just as important, perhaps more important in political terms. But in *Baby Blue*, because of the taboos and the unavoidable personal nature of one's own sexuality, the doors were really opened. I don't think there was any attempt to see what we could do with the morality squad. . . .²⁹

That the proceeds from *I Love You, Baby Blue* were used for the down payment on Passe Muraille's permanent home might seem less than idealistic if it were not for what the theatre has been able to accomplish because of the acquisition of a permanent space. Thompson's organization of Passe Muraille's warehouse into different types and sizes of performing areas has allowed him to expand experimentation and pay for it at the same time. Playing commercial successes like *Les Maudit Anglais* and *Billy Bishop Goes to War* on the main stage has financed an ambitious programme of new works on the two smaller stages that facilitates Passe Muraille's support of new talent and maintains its interest in "theatre as experience."

In a time typified by the depletion of investment funds, Theatre Passe Muraille's research and development function becomes increasingly important. The theatre's original seed programme, by which unknown artists were given minimal budgets and rehearsal space with which to develop a show, resulted in a series of readings, workshops and showcases throughout the city, twenty-one of which are described under Theatre Passe Muraille in the 1977 and 1978 editions of *Canada on Stage*; at least three of these went on to main-stage productions. More importantly, they provided a focus for what might be termed Toronto's "new alternative," a community of artists and spaces still available to experimentation and failure who attract an audience interested in less mainstream work. That some of these artists, notably Cheryl Cashman, Michael Hollingsworth and Margaret Dragu, have already gained more "establishment" reputations is an inevitable progression; that others such as Marien Lewis and David Type fight such mainstream co-option is just as worthwhile. The success of the seed programme has resulted in its expansion into Passe Muraille's New Works programme which, under the directorship of Clark Rogers, has seen workshops of twenty to thirty productions over the last year; the arts councils' enthusiasm for the project is evident in their increased subsidization, with funds specifically ear-marked for new works. Clearly, they recognize that Passe Muraille's discovery of such innovative artists as John Palmer and Hrant Alianak in the early Seventies and its introduction of groups like Newfoundland's Codco and Saskatoon's Twenty-fifth Street House to Toronto audiences throughout the decade is a tradition that must be supported if the city's theatre is to creatively continue.

Passe Muraille's ability to simultaneously finance experimentation and attract a popular audience is its major accomplishment and what distinguishes it from the Factory Theatre Lab, the other Toronto theatre actively involved in the development of new plays and playwrights. The Factory's reputation as "the home of the Canadian playwright" has declined in recent years from its ascendancy during the early Seventies when it staged such highly-acclaimed productions as Herschel Hardin's *Esker Mike and His Wife*, *Agiluk* and Larry Kardish's *Brussels Sprouts* to the point where recent productions like Ken Gass's *Winter Offensive* and George F. Walker's *Rumours of Our Death* have been reviewed as "trash." Such irresponsible "criticism" fails to suggest, let alone support, the valuable contribution of this theatre's artistic policy which, by nurturing new work regardless of audience expectations and critical response, continues to challenge and enrich Toronto theatre. The Factory's refusal to bow to commercial expediency following its early string of hits is well maintained by its current workshop programme which, under the industrious guidance of Bob White, remains adamantly "fringe." The ideal that the Factory should "pursue unconventional programming and [a] restless search for something indigenous and unique"³⁰ has plagued the theatre since Ken Gass founded it in May 1970. Rather than change his intentions when

the going became rough, Gass insisted that the Factory “remain eclectic and not settle into formula programming.”³¹ Writing in 1975 about his difficulties with this approach, Gass could be summarizing what is still the Factory’s predicament:

there has always been a discrepancy between what the public (including the critics and funding agencies) recognized about the Factory and what we considered our most important accomplishments. The public has wanted recognizable products, more hits, and a clearly defined policy. They can’t pin us down. The Factory has been preoccupied with the search itself, with the process, with experimentation, yet with an outward energy that often borders on proselytism. Somehow in the midst of financial turmoils, bureaucratic battles with government councils, the unions, city inspectors, the powerful pigeon-hole mentality of critics, we have tried not to compromise our ideals.

The Factory Theatre Lab’s inability to find “the Canadian middle road [between] meaningful experimentation on one hand [and] public acceptability on the other”³² has resulted in its loss of profile in the daily press but not its status in the theatre community. Nor has it disappointed a consistently loyal audience eager to participate in the theatre’s experiments despite negative reviews. One of the most positive signs that Toronto theatre is surviving commercialization in early 1980 is that *Rumours of Our Death* has been so popular.³³ Although it relies on music and a popular rock performer for its appeal, the play is by no means “safe”; publishing the script as a “work-in-progress,” the *Canadian Theatre Review* terms it “a Jarry-esque allegory of man’s incoherence towards man, of a mythical country’s incoherence towards its mythical people, of a not-so-exotic world’s incoherence towards itself. An allegory of national diseases. . . .”³⁴ That such a play could develop a following attests to the Factory’s continued viability and suggests that “pioneering” principles are never obsolete.

THAT THEY ARE DEMANDING, HOWEVER, is a fact that even such a brief look at Toronto theatres in the Seventies makes clear. By 1975 most of the theatres that had emerged during the first half of the decade were suffering not only financial problems but also artistic uncertainty and creative fatigue. As Martin Kinch, co-founder with John Palmer and Tom Hendry of the Toronto Free Theatre in 1972, put it: “There seemed to be creative exhaustion everywhere. We had filled the first promise and many of us simply didn’t know where to go. . . . There were other attendant problems too. The arrival of CBC drama attracted a lot of actors and scripts away from the live theatre and for the first time we were having to scrounge.”³⁵ This latter problem was particularly detrimental to Toronto Free Theatre, which saw as its mandate the development of a permanent company of actors who could work with a small core of writers and directors “to build a repertoire of representative Canadian work.”³⁶

In 1972, Kinch suggested, "These days, almost any given Canadian play can get a production. But there is no process of development. The Factory Theatre Lab develops playwrights, the Theatre Passe Muraille develops directors and we wanted to develop a relationship between actor, director and playwright in a residence sense."³⁷ Within three years, Free Theatre had achieved its goal, gathering a marvellous pool of actors — including Saul Rubinek, Chapelle Jaffe, Brenda Donohue, Booth Savage, Nick Mancuso, David Bolt, and R. H. Thompson — who contributed to a succession of hits such as John Palmer's *The End*, Kinch's *Me?*, Carol Bolt's *Gabe* and *Red Emma*, and Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. But by 1975, these actors and, to a lesser degree, Palmer and Kinch, were receiving attractive offers elsewhere. Recognizing how the new theatres were affecting the mainstream, Kinch began a re-evaluation of Free Theatre's aims, concurrent with Glassco's sabbatical at Tarragon, Thompson's move to a permanent home, and Gass's period of redefinition. His conclusion made as much sense then as it does now; it also foreshadowed the creative conundrum which continues to inhibit Free Theatre's realization of its potential:

What should be happening now, and is to a small extent, is that the people — the writers and actors and directors — who have worked their way up in the Toronto theatres, be allowed into the major theatrical institutions of the country. That will make room for the new ideas coming up here, which is what will keep our particular perspective alive and help renew the larger institutions. If this process doesn't happen, I don't really like to think of what will become of places like the Free Theatre. . . .³⁸

Within two years, many of Kinch's actors were working elsewhere. Palmer had moved to New York. Kinch, in his own evaluation of the Toronto theatre climate published in *This Magazine*, revealed his growing despair about the situation. Although his words address the plight of many Toronto theatres in the late Seventies, they are most applicable to his own experience at Free Theatre:

Theatres allowed themselves to announce entire seasons long before the announced plays were actually in existence. Panic-decisions were made to fill the holes when the promised works failed to appear. In the rush, and the acceptance of rigid opening-night dates, supposedly dictated by audience needs, many plays opened in the second draft which should have opened in the fifth. For the playwrights, on whose output the growth of the theatres depended, the pressures resulted in quick debilitation. Some developed blocks. Some moved rapidly towards formulaic repetition. Very few were able to develop and mature in this atmosphere. Fewer could produce the deep and resonant images needed for the creation of strong dramatic experience.³⁹

Although Free Theatre offered some exciting fare during the second half of the Seventies — notably the collective creation *The Fits* and George F. Walker's *Zastrozzi* — its focus became increasingly diffuse. In 1978, artistic direction fell to William Lane, whose productions of new British and American playwrights

such as William Hauptman and Sam Shepard caused more interest than those of new Canadian writers like Tom Walmsley or curiosities such as Brecht's *Baal* and Somerset Maugham's *Rain*. Guest productions such as Centaur Theatre's *Nothing to Lose* by David Fennario and touring shows like *Paper Wheat* or the Newfoundland Mummies' *Some Slick* were used to round out subscription seasons. 1980 began with a transfer from Adelaide Court of Erika Ritter's hit comedy, *Automatic Pilot*, in a production directed by Lane for New Theatre. Not only has the creation of "a repertoire of representative Canadian work" apparently been abandoned, but the development of a "small flexible group of artists and other theatre workers who are united by a sense of mutual respect, faith and belief"⁴⁰ seems, temporarily at least, to have been dropped. Although there is considerable validity to Kinch's notion that "the Canadian play and a commitment to its production will mean increasingly less if its mere presence is considered a success," its mere absence does not insure the theatre's return to "its initially serious purposes."⁴¹ Free Theatre's current situation, in fact, hints at the opposite effect: that the theatre, "in its desire for a short term hit, abnegates its more serious function — the imaginative exploration of our life and our reality." As Free Theatre's actors, directors and writers become interchangeable with companies as expert as New Theatre, Open Circle Theatre, The Phoenix Theatre, Young People's Theatre, and Theatre Plus, as well as Toronto Workshop Productions, Toronto Arts Productions and the other once "alternate" theatres with which it has shared the limelight, it loses the unique approach and perspective that was its *raison d'être*. That Toronto's burgeoning theatre market may support such a change is probably true; that it should require it would mean an unfortunate loss for Canadian drama.

It is just such a loss that makes the shift from an alternate aesthetic problematic. With financial considerations increasingly controlling the size, nature and appearance of new plays, enthusiasm for the possibility that Toronto theatres may achieve commercial independence in the Eighties is half-hearted. Kinch's fear in 1976 that "the audience has stopped growing and is diminishing"⁴² appears to have been unwarranted; its corollary, that the audience is expanding, can be seen as equally disturbing. Although Bill Glassco is probably correct when he asserts that "the days of the production company are passing,"⁴³ the possibility that Free Theatre might become merely a transfer house for productions such as Tarragon's is disturbing. Certainly such a space would contribute to the greater solvency of some Toronto theatres; but that it "would also clear the already available spaces for a wider range of new works,"⁴⁴ as Kinch hoped in 1976, is unlikely. What is a surety, however, is the increased co-operation amongst all the Toronto theatres. A grouping of various theatres to protest the *Toronto Star's* hiring of Gina Mallet as Drama Critic in 1976 achieved self-recognition of communal strength, if nothing else. The cost sharing of co-productions has now become a reality that may

mean survival for Toronto's smallest theatres. Unless they cynically pursue commercial status in the manner of the phenomenally successful Toronto Truck Theatre by mounting plays like Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, or attach themselves to a sponsoring "institution" like Passe Muraille for the duration of a production, there are few alternatives to amalgamation. The possibility that a new, small, and experimental theatre could now emerge and survive becomes increasingly slight. Paul Bettis, Artistic Director of Theatre Second Floor, one of the most original theatres to develop in Toronto during the Seventies, closed his theatre in 1979, explaining "I don't want to get bigger and I don't want to charge more at the door."⁴⁵ As Bettis's attitude becomes a rarity, the complexion of Toronto theatre in 1990 grows indeterminable. That it will survive is indisputable; how is another matter.

NOTES

- ¹ Ed., Don Rubin and Mimi Mekler (Toronto: CTR Publications, 1979), 11-24.
- ² Press release, Theatre Passe Muraille, dated 1969. Available through the Theatre Department, Metro Toronto Public Library, whose "vertical files" of press clippings and information on Canadian theatre history and criticism are an invaluable resource for the student of Canadian theatre.
- ³ For an example of the former, see Don Rubin, "Sleepy Tunes in Toronto," *CTR*, 20 (Fall 1978), 93-95; of the latter, see Martin Kinch, "Canadian Theatre: In for the Long Haul," *This Magazine*, 10, Nos. 5-6 (November-December 1976), 3-8.
- ⁴ Quoted in Ray Conlogue, "Little theatres try to get out of the wilderness," *The Globe and Mail*, 15 August 1977. Newspaper references without page numbers can be found in the "vertical files" of the Theatre Department of the Metro Toronto Public Library.
- ⁵ Gina Mallet, "Tarragon Theatre boss rolls up string of hits," *Toronto Star*, 17 March 1979.
- ⁶ Urjo Kareda, "Tarragon's short history buoyant with success," *Toronto Star*, 8 September 1973.
- ⁷ "Tarragon will take time off," *Toronto Sun*, 13 March 1975.
- ⁸ Quoted in John Fraser, "Tarragon, Glassco back in business," *The Globe and Mail*, 3 June 1976.
- ⁹ Ken Gass, "Toronto's Alternates: Changing Realities," *CTR*, 21 (Winter 1979), p. 127.
- ¹⁰ Press release, Tarragon Theatre, 1972.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Sid Adelman, "Eye on Entertainment," *Toronto Star*, 12 August 1974.
- ¹² Quoted in Conlogue.
- ¹³ Quoted in "Toronto's Tarragon Theatre faces challenging dilemma," *London Free Press*, 12 February 1977.
- ¹⁴ This trend has also been continued with, for example, Jack Blum's production of Joe Wiesenfeld's *Spratt* (April 1978) and Guy Sprung's productions of Tom Walmsley's *Something Red* (February 1980).
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Bryan Johnson, "Glassco's mission a matter of trust," *The Globe and Mail*, 16 September 1978.

- ¹⁶ Quoted in Mallet.
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Conlogue.
- ¹⁸ Gass, p. 134.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Mallet.
- ²⁰ Press release, Theatre Passe Muraille, 1969.
- ²¹ E.g., John Bentley Mays, "Taking it on the road," *Maclean's*, 92 (4 June 1979), p. 60.
- ²² Quoted in Merle Shain, "Pursuing the need for a guerilla theatre," *Toronto Telegram*, 1 March 1969.
- ²³ Bob Wallace, "Paul Thompson at Theatre Passe Muraille: Bits and Pieces," *Open Letter*, 2, No. 7 (Winter 1974), p. 54.
- ²⁴ Ray Conlogue, "Maggie and Pierre shows power, finesse and insight," *The Globe and Mail*, 15 February 1980, p. 17.
- ²⁵ Chris Mallgren, ed., *Members Catalogue: Canadian Guild of Playwrights*, 1 (1979), 38-39. Available from the Guild, 24 Ryerson Ave., Toronto M5T 2P3.
- ²⁶ This is now so developed that two festivals by Canadian theatre groups involved with collective creation have been held. See Jerry Zientara, "Theatre Synergy: a collective festival," *CTR*, 24 (Fall 1979), 114-21.
- ²⁷ Wallace, p. 64.
- ²⁸ Quoted in Herbert Whittaker, "Artist's sets give play unique look," *The Globe and Mail*, 22 May 1977.
- ²⁹ "The Trial of Baby Blue," *CTR*, 13 (Winter 1977), p. 8.
- ³⁰ Ken Gass, "Perspective," *Theatre Notebook*, 1, No. 1 (October 1975), p. 3. To my knowledge, only one issue of this newspaper was published; it is on file in the Theatre Department, Metro Toronto Public Library.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ³² Gass, "Toronto's Alternates," p. 132.
- ³³ This was accomplished by the ten-member company taking over co-operative responsibility for the extension, working without pay and sharing the profits. See "People," *Maclean's*, 93 (25 February 1980), p. 27, for a report.
- ³⁴ Don Rubin, epigraph preceding *Rumours of Our Death*, *CTR*, 25 (Winter 1980), p. 43.
- ³⁵ Quoted in John Fraser, "The revolution's over in underground theatre," *The Globe and Mail*, 27 August 1975.
- ³⁶ Quoted in Tom Hendry, "The Stage," *Toronto Citizen*, 27 January 1972.
- ³⁷ Quoted in Urjo Kareda, "Alternative theatre offers hope for the future," *Toronto Star*, 16 September 1972.
- ³⁸ Quoted in Fraser.
- ³⁹ "Canadian Theatre: In for the Long Haul," *This Magazine*, 10, Nos. 5-6 (November-December 1976), p. 6.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Hendry.
- ⁴¹ Kinch, p. 8.
- ⁴² Kinch, p. 3.
- ⁴³ Quoted in Mallet.
- ⁴⁴ Kinch, p. 8.
- ⁴⁵ Quoted in Conlogue.